

hand in unlovable hand (a chokehold)

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by [britishparty](#)

Summary

Tim Drake is eleven years old when he's grabbed off the streets of Bristol while he's on his way home. It will be okay, he tells himself: they'll call his parents, and they'll pay the ransom, and he'll get to go home.

There are pictures of Batman and Robin on the camera he was carrying. A *lot* of pictures.

They don't call his parents. They call Black Mask.

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or: the one where Black Mask kidnaps Tim and tries to groom him into a ruthless heir, and Tim tries to figure out how to destroy him from the inside out.

General warnings tagged, anything not covered by those is in end-of-chapter notes to avoid

spoilers.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tim taps his fingernails along the casing of his camera on his walk back home. It's a warm night—a little muggy in Bristol, where the ocean doesn't have quite the same effect it does on the rest of Gotham's weather.

Since this is the part of his walk that has sidewalks, closer to the bus stop than it is to the wide, empty grounds of Drake Manor, Tim can click through the pictures on his camera without tripping. He'd taken a gamble, after he checked the news this afternoon: there was a buzz of activity down in Tricorner Yards—something up in the Iceberg Lounge, though the broadcaster hadn't said what. With the fuss over the four drug manufacturers Batman closed down last week, Tim had guessed the police would be more involved than usual.

He'd snuck up to a building near the police precinct where the Bat-Signal is kept, praying that Batman had changed his route for the night. Tim clicks through tonight's many pictures of Batman and Robin, some including Commissioner Gordon's silhouette beside them.

They don't often stop to talk with him, not unless they need to. But when they do, if Tim realizes in time, he can get crystal-clear pictures—so many of his others are blurry or partially obscured by whatever Tim's hiding behind.

It was Jason's first night meeting the Commissioner. Tim stops walking to peer in at the tiny display screen of his camera—he's *pretty* sure he got a shot of Jason grinning wide enough to show two crooked teeth, but he'll need to put the files on his computer to check properly.

Tim grins to himself. Jason smiles a lot more, and always wide, like he's having the time of his life and he's about to make that everybody's problem. It's a sharp contrast to how Dick was with Bruce, for almost the entire year-ish Tim followed the two of them—he's got newspaper photographs of some of the early Robin's beaming face, but none of his own. There's a lot more yelling in Tim's pictures.

Tim starts walking again, letting his camera rest back against his chest. He'll be back earlier than usual, which means he can go through the photos in the morning. It's nearing eleven when he finally gets more than halfway to Drake Manor, which is where the sidewalk stops.

He can cut across his own yard when he gets there, but he's always careful to not go across his neighbors' yards. That leaves him stuck walking down the narrow dirt-and-gravel gap between the grass and the road, meaning he pauses and steps to the side when he sees headlights in the distance.

When he first started looking for Batman and Robin – when he realized who they were – he used to sit at the edge of the Drakes' property and watch the cars that went by, to see if one of them was the Batmobile. It feels similar, standing off to the side of the road as he waits for the old gray Jeep to pass.

Except it doesn't.

It takes a few seconds for Tim to realize that the car's slowing down, its headlights not dimming as the light sweeps over him. It takes him a few seconds longer to register the significance of that.

He backs up further, away from the road. He's on a swath of empty grass, but there's the dark

shape of some hedges, about twenty yards behind him. Tim backs towards them slowly at first, but rapidly as the car slows to a near-stop.

Three of the doors on the Jeep open. Tim watches just long enough to see figures in dark clothes start pushing their way out of the vehicle, before he turns and starts running.

There's a shout. Tim doesn't remember what neighbor's yard he's in, not sure he knows their name, but he needs to find help. *Now*.

His camera thuds against his chest as he runs, but he's not going to bother to hold it still. He runs faster than he ever has, half-stumbling over his feet in his haste. There are footsteps behind him, another shout.

There's nothing but pure terror. He makes it past the hedges and sees the shape of bushes, thirty yards off, and the dark silhouette of a fountain. No house.

Please, *please*. Tim can't do this.

He wants to cry, but crying won't make it stop. He keeps running.

The bushes are two semi-circles, surrounding the fountain, and Tim's coming at them from the wrong angle. No opening.

The footsteps are getting closer. The blood's pounding in Tim's ears, and he can't tell *how* close. He thinks he feels fingers try and catch the fabric of his shirt but he could just be imaging it.

Tim lunges for one of the bushes—*please* be thick enough to stop them. He ducks low and scrabbles his body into the dirt, trying to shove his way under it and up the other side. He's smaller, they can't follow, he can make it—

The back of his camera strap catches. Tim gets jerked backwards, the force of his momentum stopped short. He digs his fingers into the roots of the bush and tries to pull, force himself through, but the strap pulls taut and the edges of his camera dig into his throat.

A hand grabs his calf.

Tim screams. It takes him a second to register the noise as his own voice, and by the time he does, he's being dragged out from under the bush.

Tim thrashes blindly. Between the dark and the adrenaline, he doesn't see any features—he's pulled up, arms pressed to his sides as he's held with his back against someone's chest. He doesn't realize he's still screaming until a hand forces his jaw shut.

"Christ," says a voice, just above his head.

Tim tries to slam his head back, but the top of his skull connects with a chin and the burst of pain makes him lose focus for a second. The man doesn't let him go.

Tim tries to scream again, but it's closer to a whine with his mouth held closed. He kicks his heels, but another man ducks into his view and grabs onto his feet, pinning them together with one arm.

Tim watches as the second man slides a looped length of thin, bright yellow rope down his other arm. He renews his wriggling, the muffled noises getting higher in desperation, but his best attempts are ineffectual now.

It's happening too fast. Robin would know what to do, but Tim's never been less like Robin, and they're too fast.

The rope is looped around his ankles, once, twice, and tied. Tim wants to be angry, wants to yell and curse, but he can hear his own heartbeat and the men's ragged breathing and he just feels *scared*.

Tim's body lurches when the man drops his feet. He tries to thrash again, but he can't separate his feet, and it's even more useless than before.

"Come on," says the one with the rope.

The grip holding Tim up, pinning his arms to his sides, slackens, and Tim shoves out with his elbows, getting dropped for his effort.

He hits the dirt awkwardly, his feet bound, and tries to scabble away. He screams again, his throat aching with it. It echoes over the vast, empty grounds like a rabbit in a bear trap.

With a muttered curse, someone grabs first one wrist, then the other. Tim's face presses into the perfectly cut grass as he feels them bound together behind his back.

He stops bothering. The scream breaks, and Tim can feel the tears now—he doesn't know how long he's been crying, but they drip from his cheeks into the dirt.

He's thrown over someone's shoulder. He doesn't even try to muffle the sobs, and if they tell him to shut up, he doesn't hear it.

They carry him back to the Jeep. He's dumped on the backseat. He curls up into a ball and cries.

At some point, they blindfold him. It's easier to shut it out when he can't see, and he tries to cling numbly to the faint, ugly relief, that for just a few more minutes, he doesn't have to pay attention.

Tim wakes up sitting in the world's ugliest kitchen.

The first thing he registers is the nastiest fridge he's ever seen. It's off-white, and it's not supposed to be; the thing is ancient, and there's a horrible-looking red stain at the bottom of the freezer door.

His dad would demolish the entire building just to rid the world of that fridge. The thought's oddly grounding.

Tim closes his eyes before he can take in anything else. The adrenaline is picking up again, and Tim swallows, hyper-conscious of the slight motion and the sound of his spit in his mouth. He breathes in on a count of four and lets it out on a count of eight.

What would Jason Todd do?

Normally, Tim reserves the question for Robin, but he doesn't exactly have Robin's skillset. Jason Todd, however, is probably a bit better of a fighter than Timothy Drake, but he's still a kid on the wrong side of puberty for throwing punches.

Tim will gain nothing by freaking out. It takes most of his willpower to keep his thoughts focused, to stop them from scrambling away from him into worst-case scenarios.

His feet are tied to the legs of the chair he's sitting in. His arms are still tied behind his back,

bound at the wrist. He feels his heart pick up when he notices those two things, and then he breathes out. Waits for his heartbeat to drop back down.

Tim opens his eyes.

The fridge was a pretty good gauge for the rest of the apartment Tim can see. He's seated in a chair next to the kitchen counter, which has a chunk of its faux-stone countertop missing. His feet don't reach the floor.

One thug leans against the deadbolted door that Tim assumes leads outside. There's a living room next to the kitchen, which has a circular table with uneven legs, and three more chairs, all with occupants. Two other closed doors, presumably other rooms in the apartment. One is missing a corner, a jagged edge where it was broken off the bottom.

There are three windows on the other side of the living room wall. Weak light filters through the closed blinds; Tim's been out for at least six hours, maybe more. He has no idea how to tell if they drugged him.

There. That level of detail feels sufficiently Robin-like to him. And none of it made him freak out, so he's doing pretty well, all things considered.

He feels a little separated from himself right now, shut down into thinking about practicalities, but if that's what he's going to need to do to get through this, his parents can send him to therapy to deal with it after.

Tim eyes the four people in the room with him. In all honesty, he has no idea if they're the same ones who grabbed him last night – he's childishly relieved that those events are already blurry in his memory – but he's going to hope they are.

If four people, whose best hostage-holding spot is a shitty apartment worth less rent than Tim's camera costs, grabbed a lone kid off the side of the road in Bristol, then this is a ransom.

Tim relaxes slightly. His parents explained, as gently as they could, what ransoms look like last year. Drake Industries is an advanced and highly-profitable company, and Jack and Janet Drake are away from home often enough for it to be worth it to warn Tim.

His mom had placed a kiss in his hair, and said, "Make sure they call. We'll fix it."

So now that he's—now that he's *here*, weird as it is, in one piece and un-tortured, Tim's not all that worried. They'll call the Drakes, who are currently in Sudan, and will be awake, with the time difference. What happens after that isn't really Tim's problem: his parents will contact the police, so Batman will know, and then they'll call the kidnappers and negotiate ransom. He's heard Robin list the procedure, like reading off a check-list of events, to Batman. Tim's parents might have to throw in a phone call to an accountant, since they're not in Gotham, but it should be standard. If he's lucky, Batman will come to his rescue personally.

His camera is on the table in the living room. There's a card game going on next to it. The thug by the door is on his phones. Nobody is paying him any attention yet.

Tim really wishes he could keep it that way. But he has to make sure they call.

"Hey," he says, and it sounds scratchy in his throat, though less shaky than he expected.

Three heads snap over to him. The one currently holding his cards doesn't look up. After a second, the others look over at that guy, and Tim marks him leader.

If Robin were here, Robin would give them mean but clever nicknames. If Jason Todd were here, he'd call them anything from "buttmuncher" to "assdick," and Tim really doesn't think he's got either of those in him. Blue, Gray, Green, and Leader. He'll make a new system if they change shirts.

Leader sets his cards down. He gets up from the table, and the guy by the door puts his phone away and straightens up slightly.

He's visibly armed. A pistol. Tim hadn't seen that before, and he's kind of glad he's only noticed it after he has other stuff to focus on.

Leader isn't visibly armed, but Tim's not checking his pockets, so he won't take that bet.

"Done screaming and crying?" Leader says.

Tim had, uh, actually forgotten about the option of screaming. He saw the immediate obstacles in the apartment and... just figured out how to deal with those on his own.

"Think so," he says instead, hoping it sounds calmer than he feels.

Leader picks Tim's camera up off the table, and sets it on the edge of the kitchen counter.

"Have any clue what's going on?"

There's no point in playing coy. "You want my parents' money," Tim says. It's grounding to answer: Tim *does* know what's happening here.

Leader nods, once. "Lone kid in Bristol, nice camera. Figure you'd be a couple hundred thousand." He picks the camera up again as he speaks.

The number sends a shiver down Tim's spine. Not even at the amount – he knows that's within an expected range – but at making *Tim* into money. Into how much he's worth.

All the crime he's seen Batman stop, and somehow the casual delivery of it still makes him want to tuck himself into one of these ugly kitchen cupboards and tune it all out.

No. Focus on something else. Tim draws a breath in, out. Looks at the camera in Leader's hands. He's going to need to get at least a new lens, if he's allowed to take it with him, after he dragged it through the bushes and the dirt.

Leader presses the power button. Tim watches his entire body language change the second he sees the first picture.

Shit.

Almost all of the pictures are of Batman. Tim knows which one he left the camera on last night.

Tim closes his eyes and thinks about Robin's wide grin. He's not allowed to think about Jason Todd whatsoever anymore.

They don't know he knows that. They have no reason to think he does. It'll be okay. Batman and Robin will be okay.

"Shit," Leader says. "Guys. We're putting a pin in the ransom plan."

Tim's eyes open. Dread sinks in his stomach like a stone.

“Please call my parents,” Tim says, before he can stop himself. His voice is shaking.

He’s ignored. Leader has his back turned, and in the harsh quiet of the apartment, Tim can hear the click of the button as he scrolls through photos.

“It’s Batman,” Leader says. “The kid’s got *hundreds* of these.”

Not on that SD card, Tim thinks, feeling somewhat hysterical. That SD card is new. He’s only got fifty-six photos.

Green and Blue, the guys sitting in the living room, come over to stand with them as all three try to look over Leader’s shoulder at the tiny camera screen. Their eyes flick to Tim, back down to the camera.

Tim doesn’t like this turn of events.

He does a rapid reassessment of what’s in the room. He’s tied to a shitty wooden chair. His hands are bound. There’s now *four* guys next to the quadruple-locked door, but nobody at all by the windows.

He doesn’t know what floor they’re on. He doesn’t know where in Gotham they are. His breath is coming faster, and he swallows. He wants to calm down but he doesn’t have time.

Tim pulls at his feet just slightly, tests the strain he puts on the chair’s legs. He *could* snap them. This furniture isn’t built for kidnappings.

He wishes he was Robin. Robin would already have his hands untied; Robin could get to the window before any of these guys could blink.

Tim draws a shallow breath, shifts his weight, and then jerks his legs forward.

The chair legs snap, and he manages to twist his weight to leap sideways as it tips forwards, unbalanced on only two legs. His bound wrists snag on the back of the chair, and Tim stumbles, but he doesn’t let it slow his run for the window.

One of the men shouts. Tim charges for the window, half-pulling at his wrists to see if they come undone, but mostly thinking that he really hopes it isn’t a long drop.

He jumps, and curls his body just enough that the impact of his shoulder is what breaks the glass. Curls his body so that when he hits the metal frame on the other side of the glass, it at least isn’t his skull.

He’s stunned into silence from the impact, his shoulder and spine aching. Tim lies on the floor with the broken glass, unmoving, trying too late to process what’s just happened. He doesn’t blink away the white spots in his vision until Gray hauls him to his feet.

Behind the crumpled blinds, and the cracked and crumbling glass, he can see a metal lattice set in the window.

Gray half-drags, half-walks him the fifteen feet back to the kitchen. He picks up the broken chair, hooks Tim’s arms back over it, and then jams the back of it under the lip of the counter so that it’s forced to balance on its remaining two legs, Tim’s feet far off the floor. Tim’s too dazed to give resistance, even though Gray’s less than gentle about it, and he tries desperately to gather his scattered thoughts.

Tim isn't going to cry. He *isn't*.

"Right, kid," Gray says, looming over him. Tim feels smaller, sitting at this angle.

Tim feels, abruptly, like an eleven-year-old up against four grown adults. Robin fought guys like this at eleven, but he's not Robin. He swallows thickly, feeling his bravery growing thin, and clenches his hands into fists to try and stop the shaking.

"We're not fuckin' around anymore." Gray's expression, the heavysset jaw, certainly match the promise. "What's your goddamn name?"

"Tim," Tim says, breath coming too quickly. "Timothy Drake." He feels his eyes watering, and his next sentence comes out weakly. "Please call my parents."

Leader taps at Gray's arm. Gray steps back.

Leader doesn't pretend this is going to be a good cop, bad cop routine. He says flatly, "Nah, we're not calling your parents, Tim. We're gonna call our boss, and you're gonna tell *him* about these photos. One way or another."

They aren't just four guys.

That's easier to focus on than *one way or another*.

"And then?" Tim asks.

"And then we're gonna bring you wherever the hell he asks," Leader says, "and leave him to it."

Leader pulls out his phone and steps away. He opens one of the two interior doors. Tim sees a mostly-unfurnished bedroom beyond, and Leader's feet moving further into the room through the missing corner of the door as it closes behind him.

Tim doesn't want to ask. Tim wants to shut his eyes and think about climbing into one of the dark, closed kitchen cupboards and never climbing back out. Tim wants to tuck his legs up against his chest and cry until he passes out again.

The others eye Tim. Green keeps clicking through photos. They have to have been through most of them already, but maybe this guy hasn't seen all that much of the Bat before.

Tim doesn't want to ask. He digs his fingernails into his palm so hard it hurts, and he counts to five, and then he says, "Who do you work for?"

Gray scowls, and moves off into the living room. He pulls a lighter and a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

Blue, previously quiet, looks up at Tim.

"Black Mask," he says.

Tim wishes he didn't ask.

Tim *knows* about Black Mask, is the problem. He knows a lot of his strengths and not nearly enough of his weaknesses. He knows enough to make him scary but not enough to make him real.

If it were Scarecrow, Poison Ivy—hell, if it were the *Joker*, Tim would know more of how to deal with it. The Rogues with gimmicks and agendas might be volatile and dangerous, but in a lot of ways they're more predictable.

Then again, Tim predicts Batman's patrol patterns, so maybe his bar's kinda low.

But Black Mask is an empty space. Tim doesn't even know his real name.

The grand total of what Tim knows is that Black Mask is ruthless, incredibly efficient, and one of Gotham's most skilled crime bosses. The mask he's named for feels like a footnote, in comparison.

Tim also knows that Black Mask is known for torture.

One way or another rings in his head like a death knell.

Leader comes back out of the bedroom. His expression is set.

"Meeting in the East End," Leader says. "I'm driving. Blindfold the kid."

"Now?" Gray asks.

"Now. Move it."

Tim's feet get tied back up. Tim gets blindfolded. Tim gets thrown over someone's shoulder.

Tim isn't really sure if he's scared anymore. He might be past that, for now—he's sort of distant, again, except numbly this time.

Tim's eleven. He can't do anything against Black Mask. He can't do anything against *torture*.

They were supposed to call his parents.

They dump him in the car, in the center seat, squashed between two of them. Tim can't tell who, with the blindfold, and this time they don't give him the space to curl himself up into a ball.

He doesn't know if he would anyway. He kind of wants to, but there's no way Black Mask would let him do that. It might be best if he starts putting his brave face on now—that way, it might last more than twenty seconds.

The drive is its own kind of hell. Tim just tries as hard as he can not to think about anything at all.

He doesn't know how long they're in the car. He thinks he can see, distantly, a change in the light as they go—passing through gaps of sunlight between buildings, maybe. If he was Robin, he'd be able to figure out how many times the car turned, how long it took them to get to the East End, and figure out where that apartment was.

He's not Robin, and Tim digs his nails into his palms hard enough he can't focus on anything else.

The car stops. Tim lets whoever's next to him drag him out of the car and lift him up. There's no warmth of sunlight on his skin, and the echo of the car door when it slams confirms they're enclosed—underground car park, maybe.

He's going to have a bruise on his ribs from being carried like this, eventually.

He's pretty sure it's not going to be the only bruise.

Tim squeezes his eyes shut behind the blindfold, and does his best not to think about it.

There's the sound of metal scraping on concrete. A door. Tim shivers as the temperature drops, in whatever room they're in now—he's still in a long-sleeve shirt and khakis, all he needed for running around Gotham last night.

He's hauled off the shoulder they carried him in on by a different set of hands, and Tim can't help the flinch when his back makes contact with the cold of a metal chair. Someone pulls his hands down over the back of the chair – Tim's small enough it forces his shoulders up uncomfortably – and zip-ties them to something.

His feet don't touch the floor.

They take the blindfold off. He squints against the light, but he can't tell if it's harsh or he's just been blindfolded longer than he thought.

Tim's on a metal folding chair. There's a large stainless steel table in front of him. It reminds him of something he's seen in an interrogation room on a cop TV show.

He was expecting featureless cement. The walls are a light cream color, and the floor's a dark red tile. There's a heavy black curtain to his left, which might be a window, if they're above ground level.

Sitting across from him is a guy in the most horrific mask he's literally ever seen. The black mesh of the eyeholes is held in place by bolted black metal around the sockets, and the garish set of the mouthless black teeth give the impression of a scowling skull.

Tim gets why the mask alone is enough to name him for.

The room is silent. Tim uncurls his fingers, stretches them.

Leader sets the camera on the table between them. Tim hears the door close behind him.

Black Mask picks the camera up. He clicks through the photos slowly, silently.

Tim isn't sure if he's going for creepy *intentionally*. Maybe he's trying to be scary, or maybe he's just like this.

Batman doesn't mess with Black Mask much. His henchmen, sure—but Black Mask is one of Gotham's *good* crime bosses, and he keeps in his lane enough that there's not as much Batman can do. The organization, the intelligence, just makes him scarier.

Tim wants to feel around for the zip-tie, see if he can use the rope to saw it off – that seems like a Robin thing to do – but he knows there's no point. He *really* has no idea where he is, let alone how many men are between him and the streets of Gotham.

He gave them his name. He's not even sure running home would be enough.

The thought makes him shudder, and he realizes the mask is tilted in his direction again.

Tim bites his bottom lip.

“Please call my parents,” he blurts out.

Black Mask stands, the motion sudden after his stillness, and Tim flinches back and says, “Sorry.”

“What’s your name?” Black Mask asks, toneless.

“T-Timothy Drake,” Tim answers, hearing the shake in his voice like it’s someone else’s.

It’s not a good idea to give his real name. It’s a worse one to lie.

“How old are you?” Black Masks asks.

Tim can’t pick up any emotion in his voice. Will he be nicer if Tim says he’s younger? Or more straightforward if Tim says he’s older?

“Eleven,” Tim says.

Black Mask sets the camera down on the table. “Where did you get these pictures of Batman?”

Tim says nothing at all.

Black Mask steps around the table. Tim doesn’t want to look at him but it’d be scarier to look away—the even lines of the black suit make him feel taller, bigger, like a black hole swallowing all the air in the room.

He stops next to Tim’s chair.

“Tim,” he says, and there’s *still* no tone in his voice, no emotion at all, and that’s more unnerving than if he was laughing manically like the Joker does. “Do you know my reputation?”

Tim doesn’t want to answer. He jerks his head, honestly not sure if he’s aiming for yes or no.

“I hurt people,” Black Mask tells him, levelly. “And if I don’t, I have men who do. If I want you to tell me, do you think you stand any chance?”

Tim knows he doesn’t. He bites his bottom lip so hard it makes tears sting behind his eyes.

Black Mask looks at him. Tim can feel the disappointment in the air, like a weight. It makes him feel younger than eleven. It makes him feel *tiny*.

It would be easier to give in. Tim knows it; Black Mask knows it. The only thing Tim’s going to do here, realistically, is waste Black Mask’s time.

But it’s Batman and Robin. Tim *won’t* sell out Batman and Robin.

He bites his bottom lip so hard he tastes blood.

“You’re going to regret this,” Black Mask tells him.

Tim’s pretty sure he will, yeah. But he knows Robin wouldn’t give in, if he were Robin.

“If there is one thing you should know about my reputation,” Black Mask continues, “then know I always get what I want.”

Except beating Batman.

Robin would say it out loud. Tim just hunches his shoulders and drops his gaze to the floor.

“The hard way it is,” Black Mask says.

Tim sobs his way through the rest of the first day, but he doesn't say a word.

By the time they leave him alone for the night, Tim's more bruise than boy, and the cuts on his ribs reopen every time he breathes too deeply. He has to choke his sobs into shallow whimpers, if only to stop the bleeding enough for them to clot properly.

He can't give up Batman and Robin. He *can't*. He's eleven and he knows for a fact, an absolute truth, that Batman and Robin are more important to Gotham than Timothy Drake is. He *knows* that if it's between their secret and his life, there's only one he can ever choose.

Tim falls asleep crying, and dreams that Robin comes to save him.

Not far into the second day, Black Mask's panther-masked lieutenant starts waterboarding.

Tim has no idea how far into that he makes it, but it's not long. All he knows is he's gasping for air when he chokes out, "*Please.*"

And then he can breathe.

Black Mask is in the room. Tim can't remember if he always was. His head is spinning, and Tim hunches as far forward as his bound hands will allow and tries to cough up the water that isn't in his lungs.

Tim can feel the weight of his gaze, and he's still crying, and he tries to scabble his thoughts into coherency with the few seconds he has before he catches his breath.

Black Mask doesn't know that Tim knows *who* Batman and Robin are. He hasn't asked. Probably would never suspect it of an eleven-year-old.

Tim can keep that secret.

He'll just have to give up another one for it.

"Can predict them," Tim rasps out, his voice nearly gone from the crying. He slides his eyes over to his camera, still on the table. He's not gasping now, but his lungs shudder around the breaths, and he can't tell if it's water or tears dripping from his chin.

"You predict Batman and Robin," Black Mask says. Not once, regardless of how hard Tim sobbed or how loud he screamed, has the cool, level tone of his voice changed.

Tim nods a confirmation. He's got enough breath now that the panic of asphyxiation is a shuddering echo instead of a harsh reality, and he manages, "Their patrol routes. I hacked the, the police reports."

"You determined where Batman and Robin patrol, *every* night?"

"Eleven in fourteen," Tim says, because it isn't quite perfect, not yet. "I can—I'll give you the pattern." He feels tears run down his cheeks, and can't stop himself from begging, "Call my parents. *Please.*"

If they call his parents, this turns back into a ransom. He gave them what they wanted. Now they can ransom him and he can go *home*, and they'll leave him alone, and he'll warn Batman and Robin, and he won't have to deal with any of it anymore.

Black Mask ruffles a white-gloved hand through Tim's wet and matted hair. Tim forces down the sob that tries to climb out of his throat, and holds onto that hope. They can call his parents. He can go home.

Black Mask unties Tim's hands. His shoulders ache, when he pulls his arms forward to tuck them in close against his body. Like the defense will do anything at all to help him.

Black Mask sets a sheet of paper and a pen on the table. "Write it down for me," he says, and he sounds *pleasant*, for the first time. Like they're making a deal.

"How do I know you won't kill me?" Tim croaks out. Because he doesn't really have a grasp on how much money Black Mask has, whether or not his ransom would actually be worth anything.

"You are more valuable alive," Black Mask says easily, which confirms Tim's hopes. Ransom.

It takes him more than one attempt to hold the pen correctly. The table's awkwardly high for him to write on, and the stiffness in his arms means his usually-tidy handwriting is a messy scrawl.

The patrol variation is half-formula, half-logic. Tim writes out the method he uses, writes out how to adjust for days of the week, holidays, Arkham breakouts. He notes the most likely times and causes for gaps he hasn't predicted.

Black Mask leans over into his space to look at it. Tim wants to curl into a ball, but they haven't untied his feet, and he settles for pressing his hands between his thighs, for hunching forward and making himself smaller.

"Thank you, Tim," Black Mask says, and something about his tone makes Tim think of his mom, after she closed a good deal: satisfied but sharp enough not to show it.

Tim wants to cry in relief. He did it. A secret—not *the* secret, not the most dangerous one, but one good enough for this. They can ransom him. He can go home, and his parents will come back to fuss over him and get him a *really* good therapist.

Then Black Mask draws a pistol from inside his suit jacket.

Everything in Tim shuts down. His mind goes blank, focused fixatedly on what's in front of him: a man in a mask and a nice suit, with a silver gun.

Tim thinks he should beg. Maybe do something with his untied hands. He doesn't know what. He can't think of anything. Total paralysis. This is how it ends.

"This is for making me wait so long," Black Mask says, and shoots Tim in the thigh.

Tim *screams*.

The suddenness of the pain is half the reason he screams—everything goes white, for several seconds too long. Tim grabs at his thigh, but that hurts *more*, and the scream breaks down to a whine as he gasps for air between his gritted teeth.

"Put pressure on the wound," Black Mask tells him, and leaves the room.

Tim can't process the words for several seconds. But finally, he realizes it's something he's heard Batman say—it's actual good advice, and despite the amount it hurts, he presses his palms down over the hole in his right thigh. They're slick with blood immediately, and the edges of the wound scream as he touches them, and he starts crying again but he doesn't have a choice.

The pain is so much he barely notices when someone enters the room. They crouch on the red tiles and start pulling bandages out. They wrap the wound enough to stop the bleeding.

Tim panics when he sees the needle, but he's still crying, and it's almost a relief when the world starts going fuzzy and dark.

If he bleeds out, at least it won't be his problem anymore.

Tim wakes up on the couch of his second unknown apartment in as many days.

He sits up suddenly, then freezes. He's not tied down. He honestly wasn't expecting that. He stares down at his hands. Marks around the wrist, swollen and red, from twisting against the ropes. Blood under his fingernails. His entire body hurts in the aftermath of yesterday, and he can feel the bandages over the slashes on his torso pull against his skin with the movement.

He goes to move his feet and stops the second he tenses the muscles in his legs.

He got shot. He *actually* got shot.

He's in shorts. Basketball shorts, too big for an eleven-year-old. He pushes up the bottom hem, and stares down at the bandage wrapped around his right thigh. The skin around it is a mottled and ugly purple-blue, bruises littering his legs like oversized freckles, which only makes the clear white bandage stand out more starkly.

For a few seconds, Tim gets distracted from the overwhelming everything else by the fact he has an *actual bullet wound*. That's kinda horrifying but it's also kinda awesome.

Oh. But it explains why he's not tied up: Tim's not running anywhere anytime soon.

He stops to take in the rest of the room properly. It's nicer than the last apartment he woke up in, but it could have a hole in the wall and still meet that metric.

The faux-hardwood flooring doesn't have any suspicious stains on it. The living room is bigger, with a corner where a large table with four chairs sits. The kitchen looks mostly clean, a cream-tiled floor and white cabinets with a gray countertop. Three men, all of whom are wearing masks, seem half-attentive to him, but none of them are moving out of the kitchen towards him.

There are three doors. The quadruple-locked door Tim assumes leads outdoors, and probably a bedroom and a bathroom. Same as the last one.

Except that this one looks like a place someone could *live* in.

...no. No. The thought sends panic flooding through Tim.

No.

He tries to leap to his feet, and can't help the cry as he crumples to the floor. The *bullet wound*. Wow, that hurts like every swear word he's ever heard Robin say. How does Batman drive himself home after getting shot?

"You good, kid?" one of the guys says from the kitchen. None of them move to help him.

Tim curls his hands into fists against the floor. He grits his teeth.

He pulls himself up into a sitting position, his back against the couch. Tim has to take a second to catch his breath, and the heaving of his chest makes the cuts on his ribs ache again.

“Please tell me you called my parents,” he says.

Nobody answers him.

“We’re rich,” he says, despairingly. “We own a company.”

The faces of their masks turn away from him. Disregarding him.

Tim presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. He won’t cry. He *won’t*. He’s done too much of that. He’s gonna have to pick a new party trick.

He takes a deep breath, and looks around the apartment.

There’s a window to his left in the living room, and a window on the same wall in the kitchen. Both have bars. Three horizontal, two vertical. Even if Tim loses some weight, he’s too big to fit through.

“How long am I staying here?” Tim asks.

A different mask answers him. “Til the boss says otherwise.”

Tim takes another deep breath. In on a count of four, out on a count of eight. He needs to face the truth.

They’re not gonna call his parents.

His heart rate picks up. He takes another deep breath, counting slowly. He lets it out.

There’s no point in panicking. There’s no point in crying.

They’re not gonna call his parents.

Tim wants to curl up into a ball again. He can’t; his thigh hurts too much.

He wraps his arms around himself and squeezes his eyes shut. He pretends he doesn’t feel the tears that run down over his cheeks. He wipes them away on the sleeve of the oversized T-shirt he’s wearing.

That’s all the time he can spare. Nobody else is gonna come save him.

Tim will get out of this. Eventually.

He has to.

Chapter End Notes

CH1 content warnings include (beyond main story tags): torture, drugging

so excited to finally get to share this!!! huge thanks to my beta, Captain_Aurinko, for finding the time to help read through this before it got put up.

kudos, comments, & bookmarks all loved equally! if you want to poke me, swing on by my tumblr [a-large-orange-cat](#), but otherwise, see you in next week's update!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Benny brings Tim Thai takeout for dinner.

It's a deal he made with the guards after his second month: Tim doesn't try to escape for the week, and the night shift brings him takeout on Friday. He's been going through Thai restaurants for the last five weeks, and when Benny knocks on his door, Tim bounces up off his bed and grins.

"Prik pao chicken?" he asks.

"I had a hell of a time figurin' out which restaurant it was from," Benny says. He hands Tim the unmarked brown paper bag.

Tim slips by him to the kitchen. It was about barren when he first got here, but Black Mask must've eventually realized Tim needed to eat like an actual human being, so he's got dishes and pots and pans galore now. Means he's not great at remembering to wash his dishes, but hey, what twelve-year-old is?

"How's your night going, Don?" Tim asks, conversationally, while he pries open the plastic container and white takeout box and starts scraping rice and chicken into a bowl with a fork.

Don, the other guy on night shift, gives Tim a nod. He never talks much; of all the nine that have been in rotation at some point, watching Tim, Don's the one that talks the least.

Tim recalls a four-year-old daughter. Don probably doesn't like this post much.

He stuffs his mouth with rice and sauce so that he doesn't ask any more questions.

He's trying to be better with them. His first month, he was a nightmare. He yelled, screamed, cried—he *bit* DeLeno, but thankfully he's at least not one Tim sees anymore.

Tim gave up eventually. He'd been eleven and ruled by wild panic: every other day he woke up desperate enough to try bolting for the door, or shoving himself through the metal bars on his bedroom window. Now he's twelve, and there's no point in panicking anymore.

He still feels it sometimes, at night, when the apartment is so quiet he can almost imagine his guards have fallen asleep. Tim can recognize the panic—something seated beneath his ribs that presses so tightly it makes him feel like he *has* to run. He *has* to do something.

Tim got better at handling it. So he doesn't do that anymore. And he's nicer to the guys than he used to be; maybe someday he could persuade at least one to look the other way, just for a second, and that'd make all the playing nice worth it.

He takes another bite of prik pao chicken. This is spicy enough that after another few bites he's going to have to take a break.

Originally, Tim planned to use the takeout agreement to gauge by temperature how close he was to certain restaurants. Unfortunately for him, Tim's childhood didn't involve much takeout, meaning he can't request specific places. He can ask for "another Thai place" or "the one from three weeks ago," but the food always come in unmarked containers. For now, it's just a nice break from

having to cook, but he'll see if it can be useful.

He eyes the door. Don's dragged over one of the dining chairs, and he's sitting with his head leaned back against the wall. Benny is just standing, head turned towards the fridge in a way that makes it politely clear he's still watching Tim.

Tim takes another small bite and looks away, out at the window in the living room. He's not sure if he wants to go for a distraction tactic; he might be better off just going for it.

The door has two barrel bolts, one big and one small, a padlocked latch, and a spring-loaded deadbolt. Barrel bolts are easy to slide back, but take time. The padlocked latch poses the biggest issue: one of the guards has the key on a carabiner in his pocket, but since Tim doesn't always know which one, he can't guess the pattern they're using.

Knowing what Tim does about Black Mask, they probably decide on the roll of a dice thirty seconds before they step in the apartment. Black Mask's not going to leave a pattern for Tim to work out unless it's on purpose.

Which means unless he can find a way to either disable or pickpocket *both* of them, it'll be faster for him to pry the latch off, padlock and all. Tim hasn't exactly been allowed to scrutinize the locks, so he thinks it's got two screws in the door-mounted plate, and three in the wall-mounted one.

If he can get something wedged under the plate for leverage, he *might* be able to just rip the screws out of the wood. If nothing else, he may be able to get enough space that he can undo the deadbolt and shove himself out through whatever gap there is; he's not big, and if he's gotten that far, he won't even notice any bruises or scrapes.

Okay. That's half a plan, at least.

Tim swallows his mouthful of rice. The sauce is too spicy for him to keep eating straight away, so he turns and launches himself at the door before he can hesitate.

Benny's the one that was paying attention: he lunges for Tim almost as soon as the escape attempt starts. Tim slows enough that Benny makes it three steps out from the door before he has to grab for Tim.

Tim ducks under his grab and uses the momentum to slide mostly under Don's chair. He flips onto his knees on the other side, then uses every ounce of upper body strength to shove the chair and tip Don into Benny, as he comes around for the second grab attempt.

He throws the chair he's still holding at Benny's head for good measure, and gets the first barrel bolt undone.

Don reaches for his ankle, and Tim stomps on his hand as he jumps back. They both scramble to their feet, Benny breathing a little hard, and Tim takes a step and a half away.

They close in on him in sync, circling slightly. He has a straight path to the door, and he crouches lower to the ground, and takes it.

Don moves faster than Benny does, trying to tackle him. Tim leaves the crouch to jump as high as he can, and his feet land on Don's shoulder and the side of his head. Tim spring-boards off him, shoving him into Benny for a second time, as his torso crashes into the door and he scrambles to undo the second barrel bolt.

He reaches for the padlock latch and realizes his hands are empty. He meant to grab one of their knives, see if that steel was good enough to start loosening the screws, but it's almost certainly too late now.

Don's hand connects with his shoulder, and Tim knows he's lost.

He lets Don throw him to the ground, allows the knee to press into the small of his back and pin him there. Tim wheezes under the weight, but lets Don have it for as long as he can stand.

He hits his palm against the floor twice.

Don gets off.

Tim groans as he rolls onto his back. He can hear Benny resetting the barrel bolts.

The first time he made an escape attempt, the weight of failure was crushing. He refused to get out of bed for three days.

This is attempt fifty eight. Tim lies on the floor until he gets his breath back, and then he gets up and goes back to his Thai food.

They don't give him takeout if he tries to escape for the week. Friday nights are takeout nights. Anytime on Friday after Tim's gotten takeout, it's free game.

Benny gets a chair from the dining table. Don pulls out a newspaper cut-out of a crossword. The main event of the week is over, and they don't have to be nearly as attentive now.

Tim likes the routine. He likes that Black Mask doesn't.

Tim doesn't have anything on Black Mask, not really. Nothing from Batman, nothing he could *use*. He still doesn't even know his name. So he's going to scrape out handholds with his fingernails: takeout on Friday nights, attempts on the locks, the cooking knives in the kitchen, the guards in the apartment.

Anything Black Mask gives him, Tim will use. He'll *have* to.

It's not a child's sentiment. He did act childish, at first: he tried plans immediately, with not nearly enough forethought. He wanted *out*, and the need for it was a clawing thing in his chest, sharp enough to tear sobs from his body.

Every once in a while, Tim feels that rising in his throat. But he swallows it down and lets himself build a routine. He swallows it down and makes it wait.

He's not getting out of this tomorrow. Or next week. Or next month, probably.

It'll be a long game. It *has* to be.

He's almost sawed through one of the bar segments on his window with a bread knife. That's a more likely option than any of his Friday attempts, but it's not part of the routine.

If he were Robin, he could do it quickly. If he were Robin, he wouldn't even be here.

Tim's going to plan. He's going to find the patterns, and he's going to overlap them until he finds the finest loophole he can squeeze himself out through.

Batman could do it. Tim's going to have to.

Saturday morning, Tim's halfway through boiling an egg when the day shift arrives.

There's a knock on the door. Tim listens as the door is opened, lock by lock, lets himself keep his back turned to it. He used to watch desperately, to see the gleaming metal locks pulled back, to catch a glimpse of the unremarkable hallway beyond his apartment.

Every day, it made something ache dully in Tim's stomach, so he doesn't look anymore.

But there's a new sound at the doorway, and Tim does turn his head.

The door is held open for more than the few seconds it takes the day shift to shuffle in and the night shift to slump out. Bitt and Nicky – today's day shift, apparently – bring in four large paper bags, all crammed with sheets of paper.

Tim's breath snags on the hope that climbs up into his throat. He hardly even pays attention when Bitt half-throws his two bags onto the dining table to redo all the locks.

"What'd you bring me?" he asks. He sounds excited to his own ears. This feels like a belated birthday present.

"Newspapers," Nicky says as he puts his bags next to Bitt's. "This last week's, from a bunch of places. And print-outs of police reports."

A newspaper or two, Tim could maybe see as goodwill. Something to keep him entertained, in touch with reality.

Police reports means Black Mask has an agenda.

It's childish, but Tim doesn't want to think about that. It's easier if he pretends, just for a couple hours, that this is a nice thing. He *wants* to be excited about it.

It's a later Tim problem. A tonight problem. Tomorrow problem.

He wonders if they'll bring more newspapers tomorrow. God, he hopes so.

"Don't forget the egg," Nicky says, when Tim's pulled out a copy of this morning's *Gotham Gazette*.

"Can you get it?" Tim asks, and immediately lets himself forget it. There's a picture of an old woman opening some sort of public department building on the front page. Tim doesn't even bother with the headlines yet: he just scans the pictures.

Some bland article equivalent of a morning talk show has a picture of Gotham's skyline in midday. Tim presses his fingers down over it like he could feel the steel edges against his skin. There are scissors in the drawer. Once he's read it, once it's old and no longer potentially relevant, he's going to cut it out and put it on his bedroom wall.

He shouldn't be this desperate. He shouldn't let this get to him. If Black Mask takes this away, it's going to tear a wound right through Tim, deep enough to match the bullet scar. But he can't help it.

"Tim, egg," Nicky says.

Tim doesn't respond. He pulls out today's *The Gotham Times*. He flips through it, skimming headlines, photos, names he vaguely recalls being attached to people mentioned by his teachers or

his parents.

“Tim!” The sharp call of his name finally makes him look up.

Nicky is holding out a mug with an egg in it. He looks annoyed, but not angry.

“Thanks,” Tim says, taking it. “Sorry. I—um. Newspaper.”

He looks back down at the newspaper. Nicky puts a hand over it.

“*Eat* the egg,” Nicky says.

Tim cracks the shell and peels it off. He shoves the entire thing in his mouth and puts the mug on the floor, out of the way of the newspapers.

Gotham City is still creeping along, outside the walls of his apartment. Life continues. There’s a new scandal with a member of the city council, on the second page of a less reputable newspaper. A woman he had dinner with that wasn’t his wife.

The woman has mob connections, Tim thinks. Someone’s blackmailing the councilman, and damaging his reputation while they’re at it.

The Gotham Gazette has a front-page article about reconstruction efforts in Robinson Park. Arborists and conservators and botanists are being brought in, to create a sustainable and native plant ecosystem while negating the potential issues to the surrounding city areas.

Something to do with Poison Ivy, Tim’s sure, but they’re tasteful enough to not mention her directly.

He pauses when he finds a third-page article about the Wayne Foundation.

But, no. Nicky and Bitt are still in the room, and Tim will give too much away if he lifts his head now to see if they’re watching him. No hint that he knows or feels anything at all about the Waynes.

He forces himself to read it at the same pace, faster than he wants. Charity event. Homeless shelter and outreach program under big-name successful community organizers with a focusing on hiring and assisting reentry of ex-cons.

It’s got Batman written all over it.

There’s a tiny picture, barely a paragraph tall. Bruce Wayne’s broad smile, the sharp fit of his suit. The top of Jason Todd’s head, behind his shoulder.

It’s enough. It has to be enough. Tim can’t spend any longer on it.

He flips to another page.

Tim devours the four prints of Saturday’s newspapers, learning more than he ever has before about what exactly is going on in the everyday civilian lives of Gotham. He makes himself surface enough, think logically enough, to go digging through the bags and start organizing.

The two paper bags of nothing but printed police reports linger in the corner of his vision like a ghost. Tim doesn’t know *why*. Maybe there’s something Black Mask wants him to see—but the photo of Bruce Wayne from earlier this week promises that nothing’s happened to Batman.

He organizes all the newspapers chronologically. Monday through Saturday, one copy each of The Gotham Times, Gotham Gazette, Gotham Globe, and Gotham Daily. A couple of the papers are running different tellings of the same story, but none of them share front-page events, so there's been no world-ending events or publicized Rogue attacks in Gotham for the week.

It feels like when his parents come back from a good trip, bearing photos of artifacts with stories and small gifts and jars of spices they use to cook the exotic foods they ate. Tim smiles, small and private, as he reads, because this is proof it's all still happening, proof that the things he loves are moving forward. Proof that Gotham lives and breathes.

Proof that maybe Tim made the right choice. He can wait. Nobody knows who Batman and Robin are, and there's still a city out there for him to rejoin. For just a little longer, he can wait.

He reaches the society page of Tuesday's Gotham Daily.

"Jack and Janet Drake Make First Appearance Without Only Son," reads the small headline.

Tim's fingers curl so hard around the edges of the newspaper that his nails punch through it. He flattens it to the table and smooths out the punctures he put in their picture with desperate gentleness.

Mom looks tired. She looks *older*. Dad's face is turned towards her, saying something private. The picture's too small, and from too far away, for Tim to really make out their expressions, but they don't look happy.

The article gives him more insight into the shape of the life he left behind more than anything else has in the last eleven months. His parents cut short a two-week trip to Sudan when the housekeeper couldn't find him. They haven't left Gotham since.

The event they're at is a museum displaying pieces the Drakes had excavated on one of their trips. Contractual obligation, Tim realizes. The journalist present noted their "somber mood" and early departure.

When he finishes the article, Tim stares unseeing at the next headline. He only has six newspapers left out of the entire week. He should finish them first.

There's nothing he can do with this feeling—the desire to beg his parents to fix it. To make Tim's awful reality bend and give way. It's what parents are for, making their kids feel safe.

He hasn't felt it in months.

Tim takes a breath, and makes himself consider it from a distance, like something he's holding in the palm of his hand. Unlike the panic, he can't see a way to make this useful. It makes him want to curl up small and cry. It makes him want to be so pitiful someone *has* to help him, so he can avoid facing it himself.

He holds the feeling close, for a second. He's grateful it's something his parents were around enough to give him. He's glad he has this trust in them, that they can fix things.

Tim lets it go, watches it sink into nothingness like a stone.

He stacks the remaining newspapers he hasn't read. He goes to the police reports.

They're organized by time, multiple reports to a page, and also by category: investigation reports, case reports, evidence reports, on and on. There's a lot of crime in Gotham, so the font has to be

tiny. Tim's hacked his way into the police database before, and he can tell which reports Black Mask has given him: anything that involved a police response, one of Arkham's regulars, or Batman.

The second thing he notices is that Black Mask has only given him a specific selection of time, not just activity. These *only* include activities between dusk and dawn: anytime the Bat is likely to be around. As soon as the sun comes up, the reports skip to listing PM times.

Tim starts skimming. Unlike the newspapers, he's got practice reading police reports, and he knows how to easily recognize the sorts of things worth paying attention to, the signs that an assault or a theft or a robbery was more than a one-man operation.

None of it is exceptional. Batman was here: Batman stopped these criminals. Tim's seen enough of Batman fighting to visualize it in his mind's eye, to see the bright grin of Robin matched to a criminal's black eye.

The reports that don't include Batman are even less exceptional. The police went here: they were too late to catch the mafia debt collectors. Tim's seen enough of that to picture the idling car outside the address, the bought-off cops who only get out of the car once they see the loan sharks leave.

He makes it through three days of reports before he notices the discrepancy. Report from Thursday 1:15 AM, Officer Rachel Singh, responding to a call twenty minutes prior. The construction zone within Robinson Park. Four men tied to a park bench with the evidence of their criminal activity. Bindings indicate Batman.

At one AM on Thursday morning, Batman was supposed to be at the Heights.

Eleven in fourteen, Tim reminds himself. His formula wasn't an exact match for what Batman was using. If more than two of this week's nights are off, *then* he has something to worry about.

He goes back to re-check the two days of reports he's already read. The first one's not an exact match to the expected route, but close enough Tim can write off the variance. Friday night's is completely wrong.

Tim keeps going. Tuesday's off too. So is Monday. Half of Sunday matches close enough, but the rest isn't a patrol pattern Tim's seen before.

Tim understands why Black Mask gave him these reports.

This is why Black Mask kept him alive, and kept him at all. He was *expecting* Batman to change his patterns, to wise up. Tim is how Black Mask is going to stay one step ahead of the Bat.

Which means—which means that Tim can throw all of Black Mask's guys in front of Batman. Black Mask will do business wherever Tim tells him Batman *won't* be.

Tim just has to figure out what Batman's pattern actually is, and find locations in the city Black Mask is likely to have people. He'll tell Black Mask the wrong pattern—one that *looks* like it has gaps, safe for the criminal underworld to move undetected, but he can have them overlap with Batman's real patrol routes at specific places.

On this amount of data, Tim could totally mess up. Seven nights? It's not nearly enough to form a full pattern on. Black Mask will never know whether or not he did it intentionally.

But if he does this, makes the fake route, he *will* have to figure out the real one. And he'll need to

do it fast enough to come up with a fake in a realistic amount of time.

And he'll need to do it all in his head. No point in making a fake if he leaves the real one around for Black Mask to find.

Tim stands from the table. "I need a map of Gotham," he says.

"Hey, you *are* alive," Nicky says.

Tim blinks. His eyes feel dry and tired. That font must've been smaller than he thought, to make him feel the strain this much.

Nicky and Bitts are both sitting on the couch. Tim glances over his shoulder at the door. No, it *is* just the two of them. But they're supposed to guard the door.

"Why are you...?" he trails off, and just gestures broadly.

Bitt says, "Tim. You've been reading for seven hours."

Nicky holds up his phone. "Black Mask called and everything. We offered to interrupt you, but he told us to wait."

"He called?" Tim pauses, then asks, "He *waited*?"

Nicky and Bitt look like they don't know how to answer that. After a couple seconds, though, Tim says, "Oh god, hold on. I gotta go to the bathroom first. And eat."

As he shuts the bathroom door behind him, he catches part of a muttered, *just a kid*. It's Nicky, for sure—Nicky's one of the more giving guys, the ones not scared to like him or think about his wellbeing.

But Tim can't put the police reports out of his mind. Even as he fishes out an apple from one of the unpacked grocery bags from earlier this week, he's already half-plotting his own potential fake patrol routes.

Briefly, he mourns the big corkboard he had for figuring this out the first time back at home. He could ask for one, but the less information he lays out, the easier it'll be to convince Black Mask Tim's got it wrong on accident.

"So Black Mask called 'cause he wants me to figure out what Batman's up to?" Tim asks from the kitchen, around a mouthful of apple.

Bitt sighs, and Nicky smiles—a sharp, pitying smile. They're both sitting back over by the door.

"Got it in one," Nicky says.

"So I'm going to need a map," Tim says. "And pins."

Bitt says, "We've gotta run it all by him, first."

"Bet you can't bring me a steel cutting saw, then," Tim says. He swallows his bite of apple and adds, "Don't actually ask him for that one."

Bitt snorts humorlessly.

Tim looks back over to the dining table, covered in reports. He's got work to do.

The night shift brings him a map, a roll of duct tape, and a box of pins two days later. They also bring groceries and the last two days' police reports, but Tim leaves the groceries to deal with later, and vanishes into his bedroom with the rest.

The floor is a mess, and he has to weave carefully across the hardwood to avoid stepping on or shifting any of the scattered police reports. He gets Jo to help him tape the map up—it's slightly longer than he is tall, and he has to get a chair to start putting the pins in.

Tim marks every place Batman was seen, pin color for days of the week, string for sequence. The visual is way more helpful than the hundred police reports, but it's all he can allow himself.

Tim sits on his bed, props his back up with a pillow, and starts building space for a corkboard in his brain.

Four hours later, he's got a decent rough start on what he thinks this pattern is. Batman's last pattern was a series of regularly-rotating standard routes, with one of several possible variations on at least two-thirds of it every night.

This one is more mathematical. It's an *equation*, using dates and city blocks as its variables. It does require some loose interpretation of exactly what a "city block" entails, especially once parks and coastlines start entering the picture.

But at its core, it's mathematic. Tim moves, for the first time in four hours, to tilt his head and frown.

It's *more* predictable than the last one. Granted—the last one was a nightmare, and Tim hadn't gotten it perfect before Black Mask grabbed him. But it was a good system. Almost two dozen standard routes with segmented variation. It was a system Batman had been using for the entire two years Tim had been following him.

Tim slides off the bed and begins shuffling through the police reports. What's he missing? What is Batman doing?

Several hours of reading later, it occurs to him:

What *isn't* in these reports?

Tim pulls all the string off the pins. Now it's just where Batman has been in the last two weeks, every sighting, every police report tagged with his or Robin's intervention.

Tim doesn't even have to redo the pins. The pattern's already evident: the East End is empty.

That's the change in Batman's route. It's Black Mask.

It's *Tim*.

Batman knows someone's figured it out. He's realized, too, that he hasn't been finding anyone in the East End. Sure, there's a pin or four, but compared to the rest of Gotham? That's nothing. That's small-time muggers, burglaries. Nothing to do with the crime boss who calls the area home.

It's glaringly obvious. Black Mask overused the knowledge of Batman's patrol routes, and now

Batman's caught on.

And Batman wants to make sure. He wants to know it wasn't a fluke. That's why the pattern is so obvious, a basic – a really, really complicated, but comparatively basic – mathematical equation.

Tim could prove it for Batman. But he won't. He's going to make *sure* that Black Mask's guys get caught. If he does it well enough, maybe Batman will even realize it's too perfect a change, and that can be its own kind of confirmation.

He isn't going to hope Batman will realize the full truth of it and come running to Tim's rescue. Maybe Batman will, but it's too far-fetched a plan to invest any hope in it.

It's been—Tim checks the clock. Six hours. Wow. His attention span is something else, these days.

Three days is probably long enough to give back the fake pattern he's got to come up with. It'll probably be more complicated than the actual pattern Batman's using, but it's got to be a good fake.

Oh, god. Tim's gotta come up with a plan worthy of *Batman*.

Well, if he can do that, he can definitely escape Black Mask.

Okay. Plan first. Escape second.

Tim gives Black Mask another rotating patrol pattern. It's not needlessly complicated. It's not mathematically simple. It's a little ineffective if Tim were actually concerned with crime fighting, but he's betting Black Mask won't understand enough of it to see that part.

It's the best pattern he can back up with the evidence of Batman from the police reports.

He spends some of the extra thinking time sawing absently at the bar on his window. It's *almost* off, but it's starting to show, so he'll have to finish it quickly once he saws any further. Even once Tim gets it open, he has no idea what he's going to do; it's a window to a narrow dead-end alley. But it's something, and with the plan he gave Black Mask, it should buy him enough goodwill for the escape attempt to not get him killed, if he fails.

Four days after that, the night shift arrives late. Two hours late.

Tim has no idea what the hell that means for him, but he's not sure it's good.

When they arrive, they don't post up by the door immediately. Tonight, it's Nicky and Tack – and Tim will, eventually, get to live with people who have actual names, and not gang nicknames. But that's not tonight, and the guy called Tack is carrying handcuffs.

Tim's on the couch, surrounded by newspaper articles.

"What's the occasion?" he asks, squashing down the fear that starts to curl coldly into a space just below his lungs.

"Meetin' with Boss," Tack says. Nicky's expression is at least somewhat apologetic, but no less set.

“Oh,” is all Tim manages.

Tim hasn’t seen Black Mask in eleven months, and honestly, he’s been fine with that. He understands the scientific reasons for how he feels, that the pain he’d experienced last time is associated with Black Mask now, and that’s why he feels like the monster under Tim’s bed. It’s a conditioned fear response.

Knowing the science doesn’t make him feel any less scared.

“We’re driving over,” Nicky says. “Now.”

Tim’s *leaving the apartment*. Tim hasn’t left this apartment in eleven months.

Tim’s not prepared for this. He doesn’t know how he’d prepare, but he’s *really* not ready for this.

That’s probably the point.

He curls his hands into fists, feels his fingernails dig into his palms. Uncurls them.

“Okay,” he says.

They cuff his wrists together. They blindfold him.

He’s allowed to walk, which is nicer than the last few times Black Mask’s men took him anywhere. They take an elevator—he already knows he’s at least four floors up, though he can’t count the exact number of windows under his.

The chilly damp echo of an underground car park is, again, unmistakable. They’re probably invaluable in the criminal underworld. Hard for the Bat to see people moving hostages.

Although Tim supposes he’s not really a hostage anymore. He’s a prisoner now. He doesn’t know the technical definitions.

Robin wouldn’t care about the distinctions. Tim’s only doing it to distract himself.

The car ride isn’t any less unpleasant than any of his previous ones. Worse, maybe, because Tim both knows and doesn’t know what’s going to happen when they arrive.

He’s going to see Black Mask, which is already terrible. He doesn’t know if it’s for a good reason, or a bad reason.

But he can guess.

Tim counts what time he can, in the car. They drive for at least ten minutes, but for all he knows they go in circles and go back to the same block.

It’s not an underground car park, when he gets out. He turns his head slightly, trying to hear the way the sound of his own footsteps changes as Tack pulls him along, get a sense of size or surroundings.

They’re not too far from one of Gotham’s docks, by smell. Though the faint salt can permeate entire districts, on the edge of the city. A warehouse, maybe.

The blindfold is pulled off.

Yup. Warehouse. Tim’s turning into a regular Robin.

Black Mask is standing about fifteen feet in front of him. Eerie mask, well-fitted suit. He's flanked with two men on both sides, and another three behind him.

The three men behind him are kneeling. They, like Tim, have their hands bound behind them.

Fear digs its claws further into Tim's chest, and refuses to let go.

Tim can feel his breathing pick up. His heart pounds in his chest. Anything he could've said, any bold opener, dies under the weight of his tongue turning to lead in his mouth.

Black Mask's voice cuts through the silence. It's sharp enough it could cut through steel.

"You know *exactly* why we're here," Black Mask says.

Black Mask is holding a pistol. Tim thinks he recognizes it, but that might be the panic talking.

"These," Black Mask says, "are three of my best lieutenants. They're good at doing my business discreetly, and without fucking it up."

One of the three has his eyes fixed on Black Mask, looking like he'd rather be begging, but the bruise on the side of his face says he's already tried it. One is looking fixedly at the ground between his knees.

The other has his head bowed and eyes closed. Praying, Tim realizes, and the dread sinks heavier around him.

"Tim?" And Tim looks back up to Black Mask, unable to hide the tremor that runs through him. He hates that mask. "Can you tell me why they're here?" Black Mask says.

It's not a question. Tim isn't sure if it's better to answer and admit, or to hold his tongue and deny.

Holding his tongue last time didn't work.

"Batman," Tim says, doing his best to keep his voice level. "He caught them."

Something dark lines Black Mask's voice when he agrees, "Batman caught them. And all three of them were doing *important* work, in places Batman had no business being. By your schedule. Right?"

Tim nods.

"Right," Black Mask says. "Tell me why, Tim."

Tim had a lie prepared for this. "I—I must've been wrong. I only had nine days of reports. Or he could've changed patterns again. It took me over a month to figure out the last set of patrol routes. I got it wrong. I'm—"

He wants to bite back *sorry*. It feels somehow a step too far, too desperate, but Black Mask's hand twitches around the pistol, and Tim finishes, "I'm sorry, I am, I can do better. I promise. With more—more evidence—"

Black Mask turns his back, lifts the pistol, and shoots the middle of his three lieutenants.

The sound is deafening in the warehouse, and Tim's ears are still ringing as his body jerks forward a half step, like he could intervene somehow.

Robin would intervene. Tim wishes he were Robin so badly it hurts.

It takes him a second longer to even understand what's happened. That was a bullet to the head. That's—oh, god, that's so much blood, that's a *dead body*, Black Mask just—

Tim feels nauseous. He's too scared to throw up. He's too scared to take his eyes off Black Mask.

The black-mesh eyes turn back towards him.

“Want to try that again, Tim?” Black Mask says. His voice is perfectly neutral—no longer threatening, no longer sharp. Almost *pleasant*.

“It was my mistake,” Tim's voice says.

The second he hears it out loud, he knows it was the wrong thing to say. “No,” he says, “no, wait, please, I—”

He realizes he's crying when he flinches at the second gunshot and his cheeks are wet. He's not sobbing, too far in shock, but there's tears rolling down his face. It's guilt and it's fear and Tim doesn't *understand*, can't process what's happening fast enough to figure out anything at all.

“Third time's the charm,” Black Mask says.

Tim forces himself to draw in air past his locked jaw. He *has* to get it right.

The third man, still kneeling, is shaking. Tim can still—he can still help him. He has to focus on that. It's what Batman and Robin would focus on.

“I gave you the wrong pattern,” Tim whispers, loud as the gunshots in the silence of the warehouse. He can taste the salt of tears on his tongue. “I figured out Batman's pattern and I lied to you so he'd catch you.”

Black Mask says flatly, “So it wasn't my lieutenants' faults at all. What a shame.”

Tim hates him. Tim hates him and he's shaking and he's never been more scared in his entire life.

Oh god, those are *two dead bodies*. Tim hasn't picked up enough swear words from Robin to deal with this, ever.

“Would you like to give me Batman's real pattern, Tim?” Black Mask asks, patronizing. Like he's making a deal with a five-year-old.

Tim wants to be mad. He doesn't have the space left for it, so he nods, still crying silently. Like a five-year-old. Like a child.

He can recite it out loud. It's an *equation*—so shatteringly simple that he practically feels dumb when he says it, explains it, while Black Mask holds up a recording device in his non-gun hand.

When he's done, Black Mask says, “Wasn't that much easier? Think of the lives you could've saved, if you'd told me first.”

Tim is going to think about it. For *months*. And he knows that's Black Mask's point. Those lives are on his hands, and the guilt is going to make him malleable, and even though he knows it will, it's still going to *work*.

Then Black Mask lifts the pistol and shoots the last man.

Tim flinches, curling in on himself. He doesn't uncurl, doesn't look back up at Black Mask when he turns back towards Tim. He shuts his eyes like imagining not existing could make it true.

"Timothy." Black Mask's voice is commanding. "Look at me."

Tim doesn't want to. Tim does.

The cold, black mask says, "Remember. I always win. Don't waste my time."

Tim manages to stammer out, "O. Okay."

Black Mask turns on his heel. He and his other four men. They leave the bodies behind, the pooled blood beneath them merging slowly into one puddle, soaking into their clothing.

Tim stands, unmoving, watching its slow progress. He's distantly aware of tears dripping off his face. He's distantly aware of the clang of a metal door, as Black Mask leaves.

Some part of Tim, miles down, quietly recognizes this would be the best possible time to run. Black Mask isn't expecting him to. He thinks Tim can't.

Tim can't. Black Mask is right.

Nicky's hand on his shoulder is the only thing that pulls his gaze from the blood. The bodies.

Nicky blindfolds him. Guides him gently back to the car.

Deep deep down, past the shock and the fear and even the part that's still thinking about escape, there's a tiny fragment of Tim that continues ticking. The part that's given up on being saved, the part that let his parents go.

Tim predicted where Black Mask would send people, with the information Black Mask gave him. And Black Mask *did*.

The cost was too high. Tim can't pull this stunt again.

But he was right. And he knows that, once the shock fades and he has to grapple with the fear and the guilt, that'll be what he uses to handle it all. Tim was *right*.

Black Mask can control him. He knows how to provoke the right emotional responses. But he'll never be looking for Tim to control Black Mask right back, not after this.

It's this tiny part of Tim, this seed of determination, that lets Tim draw a breath, and stop crying.

Chapter End Notes

CH 2 content warnings: nothing beyond main story tags, really. a couple of unnamed goons die (sorry goons)

we start making progress towards a Tim that holds some power here! he's not a dumb eleven year old anymore, after all, he's *twelve* now you guys.

i'm realizing as i post these chapters how much trauma i actually wrote here. it wasn't my explicit purpose for this fic, i promise, we just gotta hit rock bottom two or three

times before we can get the momentum to climb back up

kudos, comments, & bookmarks loved! see you next week!!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They moved him into a different apartment.

Black Mask said it was a thirteenth birthday present. Tim expects it was to help keep him tucked away and unnoticed.

The apartment is in a renovated building. The high ceiling and exposed girders give it away, as do the lack of windows.

The *actual* thirteenth birthday present was a stack of textbooks and classical novels. Early high school, Tim would guess. Most kids his age probably despise them, but Tim felt like it could've been Christmas morning when he found them on the table.

When he's not re-reading them, the textbooks sit proudly displayed atop the shelves and filing cabinets in the apartment, used for storing the police reports and the newspapers Black Mask keeps feeding Tim. He's still allowed to track Batman, and Batman's lack of impact on Black Mask's slow-growing criminal empire.

Tim thinks about the metal bar in his old bedroom window, the one he almost managed to cut through. He was too slow to take advantage of all that work.

All Black Mask did was move Tim to a different apartment, and he wiped away the tiny, desperate handholds Tim had scraped out with his fingernails and his determination.

This door has five locks, one of which is a biometric fingerprint scanner. Tim hasn't gotten through more than two on any Friday escape attempt, though he's lasting longer against the guards. He hasn't figured out any other potential escape avenues yet.

Most likely, it'll have to be on a trip out of the apartment. Tim's got his third trip out of the apartment of the last four months tonight.

Batman is on a patrol route more complicated than the last one Tim figured out, and it's got a lot more variation, so Tim's still working on the finished version.

Black Mask hasn't shot anyone in front of Tim since, which is an improvement. Honesty – in most things – is actually working out.

Tim is currently playing poker with Benny and Tina. He's losing, mostly on purpose since they're only betting peanuts, but it passes the time, because he can't do any work on Batman's route right now.

His ability to lose track of time in his own thoughts has gotten simultaneously more severe and less noticeable. Without windows, Tim's days and nights are indistinct, and he stays up and thinks until he's too tired to do anything but sleep. Which at least means he's going to be wide awake for whatever Black Mask is throwing at him tonight.

He folds on the poker game. He eats his remaining peanuts while the other two keep raising, but a buzz from Benny's phone interrupts the ending.

“Time?” Tim asks.

Benny nods.

They blindfold him. Tim lets his hands rest at his sides, waiting for them to be drawn behind his back, but it doesn’t come. He can hear the door’s locks being undone.

“Forget something?” he asks. He wiggles his fingers.

“Nah,” Benny says. “Blindfold’s only so you can’t see where we’re drivin’. Touch it, and Tina’s gonna take a finger off.”

It’s said so matter-of-factly that Tim can hear it for the order it is. He doesn’t doubt that Black Mask would, if Tina doesn’t.

He doesn’t know what to do with his hands, when they lead him down a hallway and into an elevator and then through an underground area to a car. He sits on them when he can, not wanting to fidget and give away his nervousness.

Normally, Black Mask gives him a forewarning on which of Batman’s outlier patrol routes he’s intending to talk about when he calls Tim in, which is only once or twice a month. He hasn’t sent any advance warning for what this summons is about, and Tim’s already been out of the apartment twice this month. Nothing in Batman’s recent activity has stood out enough to be worth a surprise meeting, so Tim’s bracing himself for just about anything he can think of.

When the car stops, and the door opens, the first thing that Tim notices is the sound.

He’s not indoors. Tina helps him out of the car, onto the *sidewalk*. He can hear cars in the distance—not muffled through walls or windows. No voices or footsteps nearby, but Tim knows Gotham after dark, so he’s not exactly surprised.

He follows where Tina guides him. An alley, he thinks, by the sound—and then she pulls the blindfold off.

Tim catches sight of a streetlight in his periphery before she opens the metal door in front of him, and tugs him inside by the arm.

Tim steps into a dimly-lit backroom. There are four filing cabinets, three wooden crates, and a large table with several documents dominating the center of the squat, ugly room.

There are also about a dozen people all wearing masks, and Black Mask himself. Tim fixes his gaze on the familiar mask as the entire group turns to face him.

About half of them are visibly armed. There are a couple guns resting on the table near others.

Tim flexes his hands nervously, and shoves the fear as far down as he can.

“Glad you could make it, Tim,” Black Mask says, and the sound of a mock-smile in his voice only makes the bared black teeth seem more unyielding.

Black Mask gestures Tim forward. Tim walks slowly, waiting for some turn of concealed malice.

This is the closest he’s been to Black Mask since he was shot. He gets close enough that Black Mask curls a hand over the back of his shoulder and pushes him a couple steps closer to the table.

“I thought it’d be nice if you had a better idea of how my planning works,” Black Mask says, voice

still not-smiling.

It takes Tim several seconds to pry his attention away from the press of Black Mask's palm against his shoulder. He looks at the table.

Maps and markers of territory. Written notes of deals.

Dizzy with the realization, Tim spots markers for gun storage. Explosives storage. Drug manufacturers. Safehouse and meeting locations. Development laboratories. Black Mask's own primary base of operations.

What Batman wouldn't give for a look at this table, Tim thinks. This information alone would be evidence to arrest for more than just the people in this room. With this, Batman could bring down the entirety of Black Mask's organization.

"What do you think our next move should be, Tim?" Black Mask asks.

His hand is a weight on Tim's shoulder. Tim looks up from the table, to take in the variety of masks watching him—some in mock-tribal style, a few after Egyptian gods, others simpler or less ornate. Unlike Black Mask's, he can see their eyes behind their masks: the focus on him.

"For what?" Tim asks. He can't afford to mess this up, can't afford to let fear get in the way. "Territory, financial gain, control of drugs or guns or information?"

He's glad he has enough knowledge of criminal organization in general from Batman to not be completely out of his depth here. He still wishes he was Robin—wishes he had enough knowledge he could *win* in this arena. But with Black Mask's hand on his shoulder, he's just trying to survive.

"Let's say territory," Black Mask says amiably.

Tim steps another half-step closer. Black Mask lets his hand drop, and Tim draws in a breath, and focuses.

Black Mask's territory is centered on this map. Darkly for areas of absolute control—including where they currently are, no doubt, though that doesn't narrow down the options any. Lighter for contested areas, where either the civilians or rival gangs are less willing to bow to Black Mask.

Other colors, in the blocks surrounding, denote other gangs. One borders another Rogue's territory; not worth the trouble, for sure. Tim tries to recall police reports, what he knows about the other minor areas. That one's ineligible; it's technically a gang's territory, but they manage it so poorly it has nearly round-the-clock police surveillance. Two others hold protection over their territory fairly well, even against the cops.

He isn't sure how long it takes him. But when he moves, he does it with absolute confidence, pressing two fingers down onto a patch of dark blue.

"That's the best move," Tim says. "The gang over-extorts the businesses under its protection in that area. You can probably convince at least three guys on the inside to take it down quieter, with less civilian or police interference. Most of the members are from this area, and they'll resent being forced to extort the people they know. If you retain any, make sure their violent jobs are in other neighborhoods."

He looks up at the others in the room. "It's smaller than some of the others, but more exposed, so size will make it manageable until it provides a good enough foothold to expand around it."

Tim can't hide his flinch when Black Mask curls his glove over Tim's shoulder, like a proud father. His fingertips rest on Tim's collarbone.

"That's better than any of your explanations, gentlemen," Black Mask says. Then, quieter, "Well done, Tim."

Tim doesn't look up at Black Mask. He's busy keeping dawning realization off his face.

The praise, the touching—Tim's participation in this meeting. He's being *groomed*. Black Mask doesn't mean him to be just a prisoner. He means for him to *help* him overtake Gotham's crime. And he's maybe expecting Tim to help just by threat or by boredom for now, but he intends to make Tim *want* to, one day.

For a lot of other thirteen-year-olds, it might work. If Black Mask had started when he first got Tim, he maybe even could've succeeded.

It won't now. Tim's confident in that. He knows he has power here, power that's not just what Black Mask gives him. But if he can play the part—if he's willing to help Black Mask, he might earn some extra freedoms. Enough to aid his escape.

He uses the realization to swallow back the fear. Tim tilts his head just enough to look at Black Mask out of the corner of his eye.

Black Mask holds onto Tim's shoulder as he turns his attention back to the room. Tim has to stand there, face as neutral as he can get it, while he listens to Black Mask and his men making arrangements.

It's a mistake to let him hear this.

Tim commits as much of it as he can to memory. This is how Black Mask handles something like territory expansion—who he's likely to send, how many men, what arms they're using. The time frame he's planning on, the resistance he expects. Which police officers he can pay to look the other way, and which ones might already be in the other gang's pocket.

When the name Batman comes up, Black Mask's hand tightens on Tim's shoulder.

"Tim can figure out a few nights we won't have to worry about the Bat," Black Mask says with absolute confidence.

Well. That's at least *part* of why Tim's here, still. He nods a confirmation, and lets the planning continue on without him.

He isn't sure how long they're there. It's the pressure of Black Mask's hand vanishing from his shoulder that gives him an indicator it's time to leave.

He slips backwards, out of Black Mask's space. There's still some planning going on, but it's more divided, now—these make up Black Mask's voice on the street, the ones that do his bidding but aren't useful enough to offer suggestions, and they're talking about how best to divide their presence and numbers.

It would still be useful for Tim to hear. But Tina's reaching for his wrist, as soon as he's out of Black Mask's way, and she pulls him gently but insistently back towards the door he came in.

He makes it out into the alley without the blindfold on. Tips his head back to look, just for a second, at the hazy orange nighttime smog above Gotham, the way the streetlights' dull glow

seems to beckon the heavy fog further down in the sky.

Tina blindfolds him again, and manhandles him back to the car.

Okay. What did he learn tonight?

Black Mask is trying to groom him into an—an heir, or something. Tim's smart, and Black Mask wants that on his side.

This means Tim will be able to offer suggestions, here and there. It means he can potentially even mitigate the damage of Black Mask's criminal empire on the civilians that live under its shadow. All he has to do is play the part. Tim can use that.

He can overcome the fear, if he focuses on that. Meeting with Black Mask won't be a scare tactic anymore. It'll be a new playing field.

Tim can use that.

Tim finishes going through last night's police reports. Black Mask's move is coming up, and he confirmed with Tim that he'd been able to buy out two of the rival gang's men, so it should be a two-night event, tops.

Which means Tim *has* to get Batman's route down, for two nights of next week at least. Black Mask won't believe him if Tim actually makes a mistake and gets it wrong, and Tim still has nightmares about the three bodies.

Except something in these reports is odd. Tim frowns.

Batman wasn't out last night. There's not a single record of him, but Tim's pretty sure he's been following a line of drug deals that links to one of the cartels in town, and the police report about the bust of a drug ring run by the Escabedo Cartel—they only managed to catch one guy. No sighting of Batman.

And there *should've* been. Tim's pattern might not be the most accurate for Batman's new route, but nothing indicated a day off for Batman.

He first checks his own expected patrol of the night before that, and then what Batman's actual route was.

Nothing. Okay. Yesterday was supposed to be a day off. That's fine.

The day before that? Batman, but no Robin. Which isn't right—that was a Saturday night. Robin's gone out consistently on Saturdays for two years, almost without missing a single one. Tim knows that for a fact—he checks the police reports.

Maybe Jason got grounded. That has to be it, Tim thinks, that's all it is. Jason got grounded.

He can't shake the feeling. The hunch. Bruce has probably grounded Jason before, but even then, Robin has still gone out on Saturday nights.

Tim reaches for the bag of today's newspapers.

The first one he pulls out makes his heart skip a beat. Tim drops the newspaper and stands abruptly, shoving himself away from the dining table. He doesn't need to read the headline.

Almost the size of Tim's entire hand, the page is dominated by a black-and-white photo of Jason Todd.

His brain is blurring images. Jason Todd's wide grin, his two crooked teeth and the way his cheeks crinkled against the outline of the mask over his eyes. A man shot in the head, a pool of blood. Tim squeezes his eyes shut like the pressure of spots dancing in his vision can erase the image.

Robin is—Robin is magic. Robin is everything.

Robin isn't supposed to *die*. Robin can't die.

Robin is supposed to escape.

The inside of Tim's head is too quiet and too loud at the same time. His mind tries to race in every direction at once and only succeeds in coming to a screeching halt.

Robin is dead.

If Robin can't escape, then Tim—

His body feels like lead. His body feels like someone else's.

Oh.

Batman.

Tim feels dizzy, the whiplash realizations. He needs something to hold onto but the nearest thing is the dining table, is the photo of Jason Todd. Robin. What the hell is Bruce going to do without a Robin?

What is Bruce going to do to whoever killed his Robin?

Batman *can't* kill. Batman can't. Gotham needs him.

Tim needs. Tim needs to do something. He doesn't know what.

Grief and panic are a tangled mess in Tim's chest. A clawing weight, dragging at him. Tim needs to do something.

The thought crystalizes, its own kind of realization: *Tim needs to do something*.

He needs a way to channel this. The grief, the panic. He needs to do something so he can stop thinking about it. These are too many emotions for the death of Jason Todd, someone Tim's never even met. Too much panic for too-suspicious reasons.

Tim has to do something. He wants to move cities. He wants to start a new life.

He wants *out*.

Okay. He doesn't have to think about that. That's a thing he can do, a physical thing, a violent thing.

It almost feels like he won't be able to move, until he starts, and then that's suddenly all he is, a body in motion. Limbs and blood and a pounding heart.

There are five locks on the door.

He grabs for a palette knife by the stove; the pot he tears it out of tips and shatters and spills utensils across the floor. The noise draws Tack and Nicky's attention, but Tim doesn't care, there's no damn room left in him to care.

Tack grabs at him when Tim gets close enough, and Tim doesn't dodge the grip, just claws the fingers of his free hand across Tack's face, digging his nails in around an eye. Tack lets him go, and Tim shoves his full weight into the door, dragging at the barrel bolts, one in each hand.

Tim's head is fuzzy. He just manages to move out of the way as Nicky goes to tackle him, and grabs Nicky's wrist to press his hand to the biometric pad.

It flicks green. Three locks.

Tim's crying, he realizes.

He smashes the handle of the palette knife into the side of Nicky's skull and kicks him out of the way. He's not big enough to be fighting like this, can't push him far, but he's doing it on sheer adrenaline.

He wedges the palette knife under the padlocked latch where it's bolted to the door. He pries at it, with his full weight, and feels the screw start to give.

He manages to scramble backwards, away from Tack's attempt to grab him. He plants a foot in Tack's side and shoves, using the momentum to yank on the latch and push Tack away at the same time.

It comes loose, further out from the door, and Tim drops the palette knife to curl his fingers in around the edge of the padlock latch and rip it out, ignoring the metal that slices through his fingers.

His vision is blurry with tears. Four locks. He reaches for the deadbolt.

Nicky grabs Tim by the shoulder and throws him sideways.

Tim's skull crashes into the granite kitchen counter and he can't help his cry at the burst of pain that fills his vision with white. His head hurts. His chest hurts. His throat hurts, grief and the effort of swallowing it down, and Tim curls himself up into a ball on the kitchen floor and chokes down a sob.

He was so close. It's not fair, it's not *fair*, and his head hurts, and Tim's crying, and his hand is burning where he cut it but he doesn't have the strength to uncurl his fists.

Tim doesn't know what to do. He wants to run away from everything so badly that it burns in his chest, panic and grief and anger, but he can't draw in enough air to stop sobbing, and everything *hurts*.

Hands touch his shoulder. It's too much. Tim whimpers and curls tighter, finally loosening his fists so he can press his hands over his ears.

He just wants it to stop. Tim can't do this, he can't, he *can't*, so he needs it all to stop.

The hands pull more insistently at him. Fingers press against the ache of his skull, and the stabbing pain makes Tim shudder.

Someone pulls a hand away from his ear.

“Tim,” Nicky says, “I need you to sit up, kid.”

He doesn’t want to. But it doesn’t matter what he wants, Tim can’t let it matter, he’s going to do what he *has* to.

Okay. He doesn’t even have to open his eyes. Count of three.

On two, Tim gulps down a breath of air, and presses his hand over his mouth, drawing his next shuddering breath through his nose. He can’t sob like this, needs to breathe more than he needs to cry, and he holds his palm there until his breathing starts to even out.

Tim can’t do this. But he has to. He has to get himself under control.

He lets Nicky pull him upright, his eyes still squeezed closed, his lashes and cheeks damp with tears. He keeps his hand where it is, trying to slow his breathing, and Nicky leans him back against the kitchen cupboards and starts poking gently through his hair.

Breathing is helping. It lets Tim grip onto the panic, see it for what it is, swallow it back down until it lodges painfully in his throat, tangled with the grief already stuck there.

He’s exhausted, and he knows he has to hold on, to keep going.

He can taste blood against his lips—he’s covering his mouth with the hand he cut on the lock. He draws another breath, careful and deliberate, and pulls his hand back to look at it.

As soon as he goes to open his eyelids, the overhead lights in the kitchen press needles into his eyes, and Tim closes them again.

Whatever, then. Tim’ll deal with it later.

He doesn’t think he’s still crying. He isn’t sure he’s got the capacity for it.

The bruised and grieving part of Tim curls up inside his chest, a heavy weight. Tim lets it. He’ll deal with it later.

“Tim, kid,” Nicky says, “can you open your eyes for me?”

Tim shakes his head. The motion makes him dizzy again, nauseous, and he mumbles, “Hurts.”

He feels like a kid, with Nicky fussing over him. Tim can’t bring himself to care.

“Tack, call the boss,” Nicky says. “I’m gonna stop the bleeding.”

Tim’s expecting Nicky to reach for his hand. It’s only when Nicky tilts Tim’s head forward again, to get at the back of his head, that Tim realizes his head is bleeding.

He can feel the blood, sticky in the hair at the back of his neck. That’s okay; he knows head wounds bleed a lot. He might need stitches, but Batman gets stitches a couple times a month, so it’s not a big deal.

Tim doesn’t think about Robin.

Tim lets himself feel like a little kid, just the once—Nicky and Tack are talking above his head, and he keeps his eyes closed and doesn’t bother listening.

Nicky finishes messing with the back of Tim’s head, the bandage or patch or whatever he’d found,

and pulls him to his feet. Tim makes the mistake of opening his eyes to steady himself against the counter, and can't stop the wince at the bright lights.

One of them blindfolds him, which Tim feels numb relief for. He kind of wishes they'd carry him, but the pressure against his shoulder as they guide him out of the apartment will have to do.

Tim tips his head back when he's in the car. It rests painfully on the wound, but he can't bring himself to care. If nothing else, it fills his head with a white buzz, and the constant pain means there's no space for anything else, not even the nausea he'd expect from the car journey.

They do carry him out of the car.

Tim, blurrily, recognizes he should try and figure out his surroundings as they bring him from the car to wherever else he's headed. He's done it before.

He doesn't know if it's the apathy or the dizziness that stops him. He isn't paying attention until whoever is carrying him sets him down sitting on something, his legs hanging over the edge, and gingerly takes the blindfold off.

Tim squints his eyes open a fraction. It's not brightly lit here, and he can make out that he's sitting on an ornate wooden dining table, with a long wall of windows across the room on his left. This is the nicest place he's been in a while, and Tim's in no state appreciate it.

There's a woman in glasses with her hair in a bun in front of Tim. Her clothes look like a doctor's on TV, so Tim assumes she's going to do the stitches he needs.

Black Mask is also in the room, several feet away. His mask is turned in Tim's direction.

Tim goes to close his eyes again, but before he can, the woman pulls up one of his eyelids with her finger and shines a light directly into his eye.

Tim whines before he can stop himself, pulling back. She lets him squeeze his eyes shut.

"I can use a local anesthetic for the stitches," she's saying. "Should only be three or so. The concussion will have to heal naturally."

"Concussion?" Black Mask says.

"I could use a CT scan to determine the extent of the injury," she says, "but unless it's unusually severe, he needs at least 48 hours of mental rest, and then a couple weeks of slowly building back up to regular activity."

There's silence for a second. Black Mask says, "Thank you, Dr. Matsui. Go prepare the anesthetic."

Tim hears her leave the room.

Black Mask asks, tone dangerously even, "How did he get a concussion?"

Nicky and Tack must still be in the room. Nicky's the one that answers.

"He made a run for the door," Nicky says. "We had to use more force than usual to stop him leaving the apartment."

"Let me rephrase that." Black Mask's tone grows colder, harsher, when he continues, "*Who* gave him a concussion? The kid that tracks Batman? A couple days before we need him?"

Tim's eyes open again without conscious thought. That's a tone of voice he associates with pain—with the dull ache of the bullet scar on his right thigh.

He catches sight of the gleaming silver metal of Black Mask's pistol, in the dim light. The emotionless exhaustion is wiped out beneath the slow climb of adrenaline.

"We can reschedule," Tim says, trying not to sound too worried. Every muscle in his body is tense, wants to fight or flee, and his head's too fuzzy to hold his feelings down properly. "I can—give me a week. I can make a distraction. After."

He usually tries to walk a fine line in his tone—not confident enough to be a threat, but not anxious enough to be spineless. He has no idea what it sounds like right now, but he just hopes blurrily that he's not begging.

"Who gave him the concussion?" Black Mask asks again, tone just as cold, unmoved, as if Tim had never spoken.

"I did," Nicky says, which is the wrong thing to say. There's no *right* thing to say.

The gun goes up, and Tim's on his feet before he thinks it through, and he's dizzy and uncoordinated but he staggers towards Black Mask, towards Nicky, towards the damn *gun*, and says, "Wait. Please."

Nobody moves. Tim stops several feet away, unable to make his body take another step closer to Black Mask. "You can't—he didn't *mean* it."

"He doesn't mean anything at all," Black Mask says. "You're valuable, Tim. People don't get to hurt you."

In another world, one where Tim isn't concussed, that would be—that statement would be a minefield all on its own, a maze for Tim to navigate, desperately searching for the right answer to give Black Mask and the right emotion to feel about it at all.

"It was an accident," is all Tim can find to say. "He didn't mean to."

Black Mask stares at him, black metal and black mesh and bared black teeth.

"It's not *fair*," Tim says, because none of it is, and he's tired and he hates that it's all unfair and he feels tears run down his cheeks, which is surprising, because he didn't think he was crying again.

The room is silent, the harshest sound Tim's rough breathing.

"Are you done acting like a child?" Black Mask asks, harsh and cold and unmoved.

I am a child, Tim wants to say, but he hasn't been for several years, not really, and he knows it.

There should be a right answer here. Something he can say that makes Black Mask put the gun down. Something he can say that means nobody dies. If Robin were here, Robin could—

Except Robin couldn't.

Tim looks at Black Mask, and he can't think of a single thing to say.

The gunshot is so loud it makes Tim's vision go white—it splits his skull further open, and he squeezes his eyes closed despite himself.

He doesn't want to see this. Doesn't want to. Isn't going to.

It's childish. Tim lets himself have that much, just this once.

Tim is brought back to the apartment, and he sleeps through the next two days.

Technically, he doesn't have to, but he's been banned from all "mental activity." Which includes reading and thinking hard, which is all Tim really does these days.

So he sleeps. It at least means he doesn't have to think about anything. About the grief or the guilt.

Then he gets up, and when nobody stops him, he reads the backlog of newspapers and police reports.

The first thing that catches his eye is a piece about Jason Todd's funeral. Who was present, who wasn't. How Bruce Wayne held up.

Tim lets the grief ache dully in his chest. He's done crying about it.

He makes himself read through the entirety of each newspaper, shoving down the grief as each and every one makes at least a mention of the Waynes' tragedy. None have a firsthand account of how the family's doing, but Tim doesn't need that.

The police reports are more than honest about how Bruce Wayne is holding up.

Almost half of the reports Tim has involve Batman. Each includes details of the injuries sustained by the criminals he stopped. Broken ribs, broken arm. Extensive bruising. Broken nose, skull fracture. Sprained wrist, seven broken fingers. Extensive bruising.

Tim can't find a single report from last night that doesn't list broken bones.

Tim can't fault Bruce, not really. *He* knows, maybe better than most, how much Jason meant. Jason wasn't just a Robin, he wasn't just a sidekick.

Jason, at Batman's side, felt a little like the north star. One of the few stars stubborn enough to shine brilliantly even in Gotham's sky. Jason made sure Batman could point himself in the right direction.

So Tim can't hold it against Bruce. He's violent and directionless. He's *angry*.

But Tim has to hold it against Batman, even if he doesn't really want to. Batman is a protector, not a vengeful wraith. Batman has to stop.

Tim reads through the backlogged police reports. The night Bruce Wayne got back from Ethiopia, Batman ripped through Gotham like a claw.

Officers' notes in at the bottom of their reports make it clear just how uncertain they all are about Batman's change. Precinct holding cells can't handle this. Gotham doesn't have enough *cops* to handle this, and Tim can see the wound bleeding and bleeding, untended. The less-corrupt ones are letting people slip through their fingers so they can hold onto the worst ones.

Batman isn't helping anymore. Some part of Tim, the tired part, the part that closed its eyes when Nicky got shot and didn't open them again, wants to leave Batman to it. Wants to let him break Gotham and tear himself to pieces on her edges.

But Tim has to believe in good things. There's no point to anything if he doesn't. So Batman has to stop.

It's been three hours, and Bitt takes the newspapers away from Tim.

Tim lies in bed for half the day, plotting. It's not as easy, the concussion still lending a disjointedness to his train of thought, but Tim works through it.

Someone has to stop Batman.

Tim sleeps the rest of the day, and dreams of empty nests.

The next three days' police reports are bad enough it spills over into the newspapers.

There's a blurry photo of Batman clutching at his side. A bullet wound, Tim knows, based on the parts of Gotham in the background of the photo and the police reports of the area. Batman's not operating on any route Tim has ever seen before—and Tim's starting to suspect he isn't actually *using* one.

It's hard to hold on to the exhausted apathy when the ugly wounds of Gotham are laid bare for him each morning. The papers talk about Batman's brutality. He rarely calls the police when he finds criminals. Most of them, he doesn't tie up; their wounds are bad enough they can't move far, anyway.

It's a miracle he hasn't killed anyone, but Tim doesn't have much faith in miracles.

Someone has to stop Batman. It might as well be Tim.

How, is the next question.

Dick Grayson is Tim's first consideration. He can't replace Jason – he was never really a guiding light in the same way, for Bruce – but Nightwing is strong enough to hold Batman back. By force, if he needs to.

Tim knows from the articles about the funeral that Dick Grayson's still living in Blüdhaven. And that Dick *didn't* go back to the Manor at all before or after the funeral. Tim isn't sure what exactly his falling-out with Bruce was, between Dick's Robin and Jason's Robin, but being outside of Gotham makes Dick frustratingly out of reach for direct contact.

Tim can only affect what he can convince Black Mask to do. He knows scraps of information about imports and exports, but he knows enough to be sure that Black Mask won't go into Blüdhaven for anything short of a promise of absolute power.

Tim could maybe figure out a way to do that with a *lot* of time, but he doesn't think Batman will wait that long.

A new Robin could maybe do it. It wouldn't fix Bruce, not really, but gradually, he wouldn't be able to hold onto the rage. There have to be kids, somehow, that have been injured or abandoned in a way Batman failed to save them from. Batman's violence is all the confirmation Tim needs of the power of Bruce's guilt, and he could be convinced to bring in another child.

Tim would need other resources for that. Gotham City's foster and adoption records, at the least. Things he *might* be able to convince Black Mask to locate for him, but not things he has on hand.

And he's certainly not sure how he'd get one of the kids in front of Bruce, for that matter.

He doesn't have the trust built up for something as extensive as that. After all, the only thing he's really done so far is figure out Batman's new patrol patterns—and he's going to have to explain to Black Mask why the hell Batman isn't using one, in the next couple of days.

The only thing Black Mask has actually *asked* of Tim is something they haven't even finished yet, that takeover of the minor gang's territory.

Tim will have to use that. That's gotta be the focus of this plan, whatever the other details are. It's what he already has to work with: the territory takeover.

He's gonna have to do a lot of thinking to figure out how to stop Batman with that.

The grief and exhaustion are easier to set aside, with the planning. Tim has something to do, a goal. If he loses sight of that – if he stops *wanting* things – then Black Mask will win.

Tim starts digging through his filing cabinet. Tai comes over to stop him, but he's still new – Nicky's replacement, as much as the thought aches – and Tim manages to shoo him away. His work *is* important to Black Mask, whether or not he'll know about it, and Tim will survive the concussion headaches. Tai is reluctant, but he goes.

Perks of people thinking he's Black Mask's heir, not Black Mask's prisoner.

Okay. This has to be a good enough plan to catch Batman.

Well. Not catch. Tim isn't trying to get rid of Batman. It's just—Gotham can't survive a Batman like this. Someone needs to make him see reason.

Tim just has to make sure he doesn't put Black Mask directly in the line of fire. The consequences won't be worth it, even if Batman does manage to reign it in.

Tim has to come up with a *really* good plan.

As expected, Black Mask calls him in two days after that.

Tim is taken to, and through, the building blindfolded. Benny pulls the blindfold off outside of a set of gleaming, featureless black double doors at the end of a short, featureless hallway.

The lights here aren't bright. Tim isn't sure if it's for his comfort, or if Black Mask is really going for a "crime empire" aesthetic.

He opens one of the double doors, and steps in.

It's an almost stereotypically CEO-like office. Matches up with the vague and faded memories Tim has of his parents' offices.

Black Mask has an intimidating desk made from what's doubtlessly an expensive, heavy wood. The white-tiled floor helps the dim ambient lighting fill the room.

Behind the desk, wide, floor-to-ceiling windows give Tim the best look of the outside world he's seen in years. He can see the shore of New Jersey beyond it—they must be close to the edge of Gotham, though from this vantage point Tim can't see a single thing in the dark Gotham night that would indicate where this building is.

“There you are,” Black Mask says, standing from the desk, and Tim can hear that faint not-quite-a-smile in his voice that makes the teeth seem bared, somehow.

Tim takes another four even steps into the room, and hears the door shut behind him.

He waits for Black Mask to reveal more, before he starts talking. It works better that way. So he watches, concealing the wariness, as Black Mask moves towards him, standing in the center of the room.

“Batman’s been unpredictable,” Black Mask says. “Four men have been hospitalized so far. Our organization is just as affected as any other, which isn’t what I expect these days.”

“He’s not following a pattern at all,” Tim says, honestly. “He’s just pacing Gotham.”

“Like an animal in a cage,” Black Mask says. “Gotham doesn’t deserve the way he’s treating her.”

Tim hates it when he agrees with Black Mask.

But this is an important step in his plan. Tim forces his voice level when he says, “I think something happened to Robin.”

He can’t see Black Mask’s eyes, but the weight of catching his attention is so heavy it’s practically a physical sensation.

“He hasn’t been seen in a week and a half,” Tim says. “He’s not as constant as Batman, but—this is long. Plus Batman was missing for three days, and now there’s no pattern.”

The longer Black Mask’s silence stretches, the more nervous Tim starts to feel. It slips into his words, and he lets it. It’ll be easier to convince him.

“Batman’s obviously violent, and he’s working longer and faster, even when he’s wounded. He’s grieving, and he’s angry.” Tim has to take a breath to steady himself, before he says, “That’s our opening.”

He expects a certain response, and the way Black Mask slips his gloved hands into his pockets says he’s got it.

“So the Bat is reckless, angry, and unpredictable,” Black Mask repeats, “and that’s the best time for us to operate?”

Tim says, “Batman can spot a set-up from the other side of Gotham. He’s not formidable because he’s a good fighter. He’s your opponent because he’s smart.”

Tim says, “Grief will destroy that.”

He can see the moment it slips into Black Mask’s head. The idea of *tricking* Batman. Tim wishes he felt bad for this being the plan, but it’s for Batman’s sake. The ends justify the means.

“You’re saying we can destroy the Bat?” Black Mask asks, and there’s caution in his voice.

He’s probably remembering the camera. Tim’s blatant interest in Batman and Robin, when he first arrived. He’s definitely not going to believe a plan that says it will kill Batman.

Tim’s pretty sure he couldn’t come up with one of those, even if he was trying.

“No,” Tim says. “You said it yourself. He’s like a caged animal. The last thing you want to do is

get in the cage with him.”

“So you’re suggesting bait,” Black Mask says.

“Yes. Batman’s going to go for the biggest and baddest target.” Tim pauses. The words feel weird on his tongue, weighted wrong, but he makes himself continue, “We just need to make sure that’s not us.”

We. It’s smoke and mirrors, a mask Tim can take advantage of. It’s what Black Mask has been using. It’s what he wants to hear.

“What’s your suggestion?”

Tim tries to stifle the satisfaction that the question brings him. And then he lets it show, just a little, a motion of his shoulders, a curl of his lip. Satisfaction and pleasure.

If Black Mask wants to think Tim is eager to please, all the better for Tim.

“The Joker.”

It’s a big ploy. Tim has a suspicion about who killed Robin. The Joker’s breakout of Arkham and subsequent absence, as well as the vanishing act of his following, matches up to the timeline of whatever happened in Ethiopia too well.

The Joker’s swift return to Arkham is maybe the only thing that kept him alive, before Batman could get back to Gotham.

“But,” Tim continues, “we’ll need to be more careful than that. I don’t think the Joker alone will be enough to manage.”

“Elaborate,” Black Mask says. He paces back over to his desk, and Tim can see him tap at a large tablet.

“The Joker can draw Batman,” Tim says. “But we need someone else to be willing to get him out, or Batman will come straight here. We need someone who won’t leave a single thread that leads back to us.”

Black Mask is quiet. Tim waits, looking at the tilt of the mask down towards the screen he’s working on.

The mask tilts back up, and Tim says, “I’m suggesting you contact Deathstroke.”

He can see the immediate dismissal. He waits it out, and the scornful tilt of Black Mask’s head slowly loosens.

“You have a plan.”

“Deathstroke is a lot for a minor move,” Tim says. “But tell him the Joker killed Robin, and I think he’ll do it for free. Or at least for a fraction of his usual cost. There’s a thousand and one people waiting to hire him, especially to spite Batman, and his professionalism means he never talks about employers.”

Tim is betting on what he knows of Deathstroke through Batman and Nightwing, and especially Nightwing’s time with the Titans. He *knows* that Deathstroke has a vendetta against Nightwing, a grudge based on some conflict Tim never figured out, and while Tim isn’t exactly sure if

Deathstroke is going to push for Batman murdering the Joker or the Joker murdering Batman, either result would ruin Nightwing's life.

It's a pessimistic bet to make, but needs must.

"Plus," Tim says, when Black Mask gives him no reply, "a prior relationship won't stop Deathstroke from going after you, if he's paid to, but this kind of job will help any talks you want to have with him later."

Tim's showing a lot of his hand. Not all of it—he knows that the evidence he's presented *will* work. It doesn't add up to Tim's actual plan. It adds up to a solid, if overly ambitious, plan to gain territory.

"It's overkill," Black Mask says. "Those are big players, for a small move. I can sacrifice half a dozen men for a distraction and get the same result."

"No, you can't," Tim says. It practically feels like he wrote this script in advance. "You're making moves, you need trust. Sacrifice one of your lieutenants and his men, and your hold on this particular territory won't take. They're a loyal neighborhood."

"I can keep it through force," Black Mask says. His tone is creeping towards frustrated, which means this is Tim's last attempt at convincing him.

If Tim fucks this up, he might actually get Batman killed.

"Not with Batman like this," Tim says. His voice comes out quieter as he continues, "I'm not—I can't help with Batman's routes, when he's like this. Let me help you plan."

He sounds nervous. He sounds *eager*.

Black Mask stares at him. Tim thinks he does, at least.

"I'll try it," Black Mask says. "If Deathstroke says no, you're going to help me figure out which buildings will cause the best distraction when they explode."

If he's distracting Batman, those will be buildings with people in them. Tim shoves down the fear. He won't mess this up. He won't.

"Deal," Tim says.

Tim has no idea what he's doing.

He eyes the exposed steel girders of his apartment, tempted to climb them, to see if he can. To do *something*.

It's Thursday, April 23rd. It's 11:20 PM on an entirely unremarkable night. It's raining, probably, or it will soon—Tim has no windows but the bullet scar on his right thigh aches like a pressed bruise when it gets humid before a rainstorm. Gotham's grey skies will be heavier and darker tonight than usual.

Black Mask is making his move tonight. If Tim's expectation of the schedule is correct, Black Mask has already *started* making his move tonight.

Tim keeps re-checking police reports, like he can gain a perfect understanding of what Batman is

going to do.

One part of his mind is insisting he should've planned this better. Surely he could figure it out, through sheer force of will, if nothing else. Tim's whole thing is figuring out what Batman is going to do. This cluelessness, this fear, is blinding. Tim can't do anything else.

Worst-case scenario, Batman and Nightwing both die tonight.

Well—that's *always* a worst-case scenario, basically. What's the realistic worst case?

Realistic worst case is that Batman kills the Joker, and becomes just as violent and bloody and fearsome as any other Rogue in Gotham. That'll be a higher body count than anything Tim could ever have orchestrated on his own.

Deathstroke's involvement alone means Tim's plan is relatively on-track. At the least, his presence will be enough to stall Batman, like Tim said it would—plus, Batman's likelihood of killing the Joker plummets if Deathstroke is there. With a competent enough enemy, one that will make Batman start thinking about a *why*, Bruce won't be able to fall fully into grief and rage.

There's a lot of possible gaps. There's a *lot* of places for this to go wrong.

Tim paces between the kitchen counter and the armchair in the living room while he goes over each possible flaw with needle-point nerves. He doesn't recognize the two guards he has tonight—Black Mask pulled all his others for something else, either the territory move or another plan or just increased security on Tim. The new guys watch him like hawks, and the added scrutiny isn't helping Tim's patience any.

He's not planning on escaping tonight. Usually, panic and anxiety are the things that make him want to—but he'd be counteracting his own efforts by trying to leave. He needs this all to go right. He needs Black Mask to trust him.

Tim's betting on so many things in order to reach the plan he has. He's betting that the Joker was the one who killed Robin; that Nightwing keeps tabs on Deathstroke's whereabouts; that Bruce is, fundamentally, *good*.

That last one is the most nerve-wracking for the night. Tim can look at cause and effect, previous evidence. He's good at extrapolating a lot of information off of a little evidence, like the way he's confident about the Joker. He can predict behaviors, like he predicted Deathstroke would jump at the chance to drag the Joker out of Arkham and into Batman's waiting fist.

Ultimately, Tim's betting that Bruce Wayne is a man whose sense of right and wrong is stronger than his desire for vengeance.

It's an impossible task. Tim will hand-deliver Batman his son's murderer and the only audience he's sure of is a man who would love to see Batman snap.

This is the part of his plan that makes him want to start climbing walls.

It's a blind bet. It's childish faith.

It's *Batman*.

He has to do the impossible. Bruce lives and breathes by it. Batman has to see that no violence will bring Jason back. That no amount of shed blood or broken bones will help anyone.

That's Tim's bet. He'll demand the impossible of Batman, and trust that Gotham will still be standing in the morning.

He knows he isn't the first. Or the last.

Tim tries to go to sleep at three AM. Anything that's still happening is well under way. Tim's set this in motion, and he has to trust his own instincts.

Tim lies in his bed and stares at the popcorn ceiling.

He's placing absolute faith into a man who has never saved him. Who has never, despite the hints Tim *knows* were there, even learned of Tim's existence.

This is Tim's dumbest idea.

The police reports tomorrow morning are going to be incredible.

And they are.

Tim sleeps terribly. He's up before the sounds of Gotham's morning rush even start filtering into his windowless apartment. He scares the living hell out of his two guards by appearing silently, exhausted and unaware they didn't see him coming, and offering them omelets.

He figures breakfast is as good an apology for pacing last night as anything.

He doesn't know what to do with himself. In the light of dawn – well, the florescent kitchen lights – he kind of doesn't want to keep going over the possible mistakes he's made. He wants to know.

Tim's equivalent of the morning paper arrives. He can judge by how many pages there are how much the police managed to catch and report on last night.

The actual morning paper, Tim drops on the kitchen counter to deal with later. If any journalists ever write an article on last night's events, it won't be overnight. The police reports are the best picture he has.

He skims through. For the first several hours, nothing is out of the ordinary. Batman descends like a shadow as soon as the sun fades below the horizon, and Gotham's criminals bleed and break.

Breakout at Arkham. The reports of the Bat vanish entirely, until his arrival at the asylum.

One report mentions Nightwing. Tim feels hope take root in his chest like a strangler vine.

One long report details the Joker's return to Arkham. A fracture in his jaw and one of the bones in his palm is broken. He's alive.

Nightwing is the one who brought him in.

Not a single report, not *one*, mentions a whisper of anything in the gang territory pressed up against the East End. The distraction was big enough to catch the police's eye, too.

Tim doesn't know if the plan within the plan worked yet. The Joker's not dead—so at the very least, Nightwing was capable of stopping Batman, if nothing else. These reports don't say whether

or not Nightwing and Batman argued about Bruce's violence. They don't say whether Dick went back to Wayne Manor, or back to Blüdhaven. They can't tell Tim if his plan worked, if someone is going to pull Batman back from the brink of destruction.

But hope is a cloying taste, hope is a strangler vine. It's an inescapable promise.

Tim presses his fingertips against the edge of the police reports like they're a promise of deliverance.

For the first time in almost two years, Tim won. Black Mask gave Tim a slip of power, the opportunity to control something, and Tim used it for more than Black Mask could possibly predict he would.

It—it can work. This strategy. Playing the part well enough that Black Mask gives Tim just a little more power, a little more length to his leash, and Tim uses it for more than he was ever meant to.

It's not going to be easy. It will require meticulous planning, and incredible subtlety—and, beyond all of that, it will take *time*. But this is a victory, and Tim, for just a second, lets himself revel in it. The taste of it sits on his tongue, like candy dissolving, sweet and sharp in equal measure.

Then he sets the feeling down, and picks up today's newspapers.

Chapter End Notes

CH 3 content warnings: canonical temporary character death, another goon death (Black Mask is not a good person to work for)

Tim gets a win! we're at the midpoint and I'm SO excited because the second half of this was where this AU of Tim starts to come into his own. next week is a chapter I keep rereading, I enjoyed writing it so much.

see you next week for that! leave kudos, comments, or stick a bookmark if you've been enjoying!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tim is fourteen, in his third apartment, when Black Mask walks in while he's mashing potatoes.

It's four o'clock, either in the morning or the afternoon, Tim's lost track and the clock in the kitchen doesn't say. Tim's in pajama pants and one of the T-shirts he's had since he was eleven.

Tim freezes. He knows, cognitively, that his apartments are and have always been prisons. That Black Mask is the one that holds him here.

Black Mask has never come to his apartment before. These are places Tim feels safe—places that are *Tim's*, despite all the ways they aren't.

Tim feels dumb for letting himself begin to believe that.

Tim steps out and around the marble kitchen counter. This is the nicest apartment yet—it's the first one that feels like an easy place to live, somewhere intended for living. Tim knows it's a reward for making himself useful.

What Tim doesn't know is why, exactly, Black Mask is standing in the entry hallway, looking at him.

Except that Black Mask is holding a laptop.

Tim feels it catch his attention like a hook. He forces himself to look up, gaze steady on Black Mask's face. He shifts the pot of half-mashed potatoes to the side.

Tim suspects he knows *exactly* why Black Mask is standing in the entry hallway.

"Did something go wrong?" he makes himself ask, as casually as he can. The question is unrelated to the laptop, but it's an easier place to start.

Tim helped with planning another territory shift three weeks ago. It required a more violent takeover than most of the ones he's helped with previously, so he was a little on edge about it, but it seems to have settled down quickly.

Now that Batman's stable, with Nightwing back in Gotham more often than not, they have regular patrol routes again. Tim's work is three times as hard, since they don't always work together. He has to have a Batman pattern, a Nightwing pattern, and a Batman-and-Nightwing pattern to cover all his bases.

Now that Batman's stable, the plans Tim comes up with for Black Mask are smaller, subtler. He has to wait for all possible patterns for an evening to line up just right, so Black Mask can make moves with full confidence. Smaller business happens in the riskier gaps, and Black Mask goes for big swings on the sure bets.

It's been working so far. Guilt is a heavy stone in Tim's stomach that grows as he marks off the slowly-expanding borders of Black Mask's territory in Gotham.

With the moves he's allowed to make, he *can't* do anything to Black Mask. He knows this. He

rolls the knowledge around inside his head as he lays awake at night, until it's worried smooth as a river stone. He can't do anything yet.

Tim looks at the laptop Black Mask is carrying, and re-evaluates that *yet*.

"Everything is going smoothly with the move," Black Mask tells him. "As you predicted."

Tim nods his head.

"This is a thank-you gift," Black Mask says.

He holds up the laptop.

Tim grabs the hope and crams it back down into Pandora's Box before it can bubble up too high. There's a catch. Black Mask knows Tim can at *least* hack into Gotham's police database. Black Mask isn't giving him unrestricted internet access. He's smarter than that.

So Tim doesn't rush for it. He abandons the mashed potatoes, moves around the counter to take the offered laptop – a fairly slim one, compared to the laptops he remembers from years ago – and sets it on the dining table.

It's already on when he opens it. His eyes flick automatically to the internet symbol in the taskbar.

No connection, of course. Tim can look at it later to poke around, but he knows Black Mask is smarter than just disabling a setting or two. There won't be a way for him to get a connection from inside the apartment.

Okay. No internet. Tim's smart; he knows why Black Mask is giving him this.

He opens up File Explorer.

Neatly arranged, there are alphabetical series of folders. Tim scrolls quickly and skims folder titles—City Auditor and Harbormaster and Public Works.

He opens the Personnel folder. More folders, broken into broad category: employee recruitment, union relations, on and on. He opens the Records folder. And another two inside it.

Tim finds records of employment for the mayor's secretary from eighty years ago.

It's backlogs, as well as current records. Scans or at least summaries of the archives of Gotham, which Tim wasn't ever able to find digital versions of.

That's an insane amount of work, unfathomable, and more than anything, it gives Tim a sense of scope for the resources Black Mask is willing to put towards him. Tim shoves the realization and accompanying flood of fear aside as fast as it occurs to him.

This is court cases, public works projects, adoption records, the psychological evaluations of Arkham's patients—it's all here. *Anything* Gotham City has left a paper trail for, it's on here. Any government record.

Tim doesn't bother to shove down the stunned expression as he turns to look at Black Mask.

Black Mask seems pleased with the response. His tone is borderline affectionate when he says, "You've been doing outstanding work with limited resources. I wanted to see what you're really capable of." The affection fades as he continues, "The files will be updated by every morning shift. Anything you want physical copies of, you'll be given a printer for. Other records, even private

ones, can be investigated at request.”

The level statement of Tim’s new allowances makes some of the eagerness fade. He *has* to remember that none of this is a kindness—that everything he’s given is with a purpose. The apartment, the laptop, the clothes on his back. There’s a *reason*.

He needs to pretend Black Mask is successfully turning Tim into a loyal heir every second he’s awake, but he absolutely cannot risk starting to believe it.

Black Mask holds out a USB drive.

There’s really only one thing worth giving Tim that isn’t already on this laptop, and his breath snags in his throat.

“You have a new assignment,” Black Mask says.

Tim’s frozen, one hand resting lightly on the laptop’s trackpad. He truly didn’t expect this. Not yet, not *nearly* so soon.

Process. Understand. Plan.

“What am I handling?” Tim asks. He forces his feet to move, forces himself to walk across the room to take the USB drive from the fine leather of Black Mask’s gloves. The gloves are coarse against his fingers where they touch. It takes most of his self-control to keep his expression still.

He crosses the room, letting a held breath out slowly as he gains distance. He plugs the USB in.

“My weapons trading,” Black Mask tells him. “You have three weeks to familiarize yourself with deals in Gotham, and then you’ll be looking at imports and exports, too.”

Hope is a strangler vine, and behind Tim’s ribs, it starts to flower.

This USB is full of summaries of Black Mask’s operations. Not all of it – Tim’s smart enough to see the gaps immediately – but a *lot* of it. Things Tim’s only been told in conversation or guessed at from the police reports.

There are the records of arms trading. Drug importing, manufacturing, exporting, selling. Gambling dens, bookkeepers, pimps and fight rings. Markers of territory and notation of gangs within it. Movements on the neighboring crime groups.

Movements of the bigger, settled players. Penguin, Two-Face, the Falcone family.

“This isn’t the kind of information you keep written down,” Tim says out loud.

Something like victory is growing in his chest as he thinks about the possibilities. Tim’s being given the power to *do* something. He might stay within these walls, but he has the chance to press his fingerprints into the rest of Gotham beyond. This city—she’s clay, malleable. Tim could make her hold the shape of his choices.

Maybe this is why they all do it. Mob bosses, Rogues. For this feeling of power. This ability to *shape*.

Tim wants to shove down the feeling. He knows it’s not right. But he also knows it’s what Black Mask wants to see, and Tim draws in a level breath, pulling his eyes away from the folders and folders of incredibly incriminating evidence, and back towards the silhouette of Black Mask in the

hallway.

He still has that ability to feel like a black hole in a room. Drawing in the light and devouring it.

“I made sure I had files,” Black Mask says. “For you.”

Tim draws in a breath on a count of four, and out on a count of eight.

“Is your focus on weapons deals more about firepower, control, connections, or finances?” he asks.

“How many can you do?” Black Mask asks.

Tim makes himself actually consider it. He doesn’t know all that much about Black Mask’s weapons deals—drugs are easier to track, because guns wind up in everyone’s hands one way or another, and it’s easier to trace the compounds in drugs via police records than the makes of guns. If he’s assuming it’s an operation with limited resources and attention – which would explain Black Mask giving it to him – then his capabilities will be somewhat reduced.

“Pick two,” Tim says. “Maybe three, once I know what I’m working with.”

He can do three for sure. All four is the bet he isn’t sure on, but he certainly doesn’t want Black Mask to start correctly estimating Tim’s capabilities.

“Control and finances,” Black Mask says.

Tim’s lips tighten. Those are going to be the hardest two to balance easily, but he’ll manage.

“Give me a week,” he says.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Black Mask says, a smile in his voice.

That’s the thing that finally fills Tim’s mouth with enough bitterness that he can swallow down the sensation of power. He likes a challenge—thinking through plans is one of his few entertainments. But he *isn’t* allowed to look forward to this. Tim is going to make plans that will put weapons into the hands of people that will use them. He can mitigate the damage, but damage is inevitable.

Breathe in on a count of four. Out on eight.

Before Tim does anything else, he’s going to have to do a truly astonishing amount of reading.

He thinks he hears Black Mask’s footsteps as he leaves. He’s already skimming through the beginning of the slow but never-ending shift of Gotham’s criminal underbelly.

“Sell high to the Kovra,” Tim tells Black Mask. “They’re nervous because the Street Demonz are pushing on them, but there’s not enough firepower in Gotham to get them out of that trap. The Demonz have enough of their own guns that the addition of another batch won’t matter, when the Kovra collapse.”

“And we lose a customer,” Black Mask says.

Tim looks up from the map open on his laptop. It’s one of many—a layout of the nuanced criminal interactions in each region of the city.

“You never said anything about maintaining connections,” Tim says.

It's ruthless, but this way, the only people likely to die will be either the Kovra gang or the Demonz. The guns will only be in the hands of people that can't usually acquire them – the Kovra – for two weeks at most.

Black Mask is sitting at the imposing desk in the office in Tim's apartment. Originally, Tim had only really intended it for file storage—the dining table is bigger, and he just dragged the big corkboard out there to work. But they meet here, now, once a week.

Black Mask gets the desk. Tim dragged in an armchair from the living room – not the one he likes, but the uncomfortable one – and sits on that with his laptop wedged between his knees and his stomach.

“Also,” Tim adds, “whoever the guys from Norway are, they're charging too much.”

“They sell unique tech,” Black Mask says, for the second week in a row.

They sell some bizarre guns cobbled together from alien parts and some scrap tech left over from someone who visited from an alternate future or something. High-powered bullets that don't rely on gunpowder; they're a lot quieter and can punch through thicker walls than normal bullets, from the information Black Mask has shared.

“That doesn't mean it performs any better than any other gun in practice,” Tim says. “Plus, since they *are* unique tech, we have to be picky about who we sell to.”

Black Mask hums, noncommittal. Tim can tell that he's not convinced; he'll keep an eye on the Norway dealers, but Tim will need more concrete evidence if he wants to push it.

Those deals are a back-burner issue, though. Tim's pretty sure the tech involved is underutilized in guns, so it's just a matter of getting them off the streets before they fall into someone else's hands and get repurposed. In the next few months, Tim can probably convince Black Mask to double-cross them and out them to the authorities, at which point it will draw Batman's attention, and he'll follow up if he needs to.

His *current* play is a little more occupying. Tim's not actually convinced on this one—the evidence is there, mostly, but it's a connection of very long threads.

The pros outweigh the cons, even if Tim winds up being wrong. He needs Black Mask's trust.

“I, uh,” Tim starts. He gets up from the armchair to splay several sheets of paper across the desk in front of Black Mask. “I wanted to talk about Carlo Rossi,” he says, and makes his voice firmer, more confident.

“Now that's an intriguing change of topic.” Black Mask rests his hands on the surface of the desk, framing the papers Tim's put down. The motion shifts him closer to Tim and it takes every ounce of his self-control to not pull himself away.

“Rossi's been in charge of securing most of your weapons for trade for—two years? I'm estimating,” Tim says. He doesn't have as much backlogged data of Black Mask's operations as he does of Gotham City paperwork, so some of this is still guesswork.

Black Mask nods, so Tim's guess is close enough.

“I'm not *positive* of anything, but it looks to me like he's been taking a bigger cut.”

Black Mask's hands curl into fists on the desks, and his attention turns from Tim to the papers laid

out in front of him.

“It’s not exactly a clean paper trail,” Tim explains. He doesn’t want to, but he moves his hands forward, into Black Mask’s personal space, to point out the figures. “He gives you the expected amount for his deals, but I think he’s been making better deals than that. Every time it’s not Rossi’s guys, your cut increases. A small amount, not important on its own, but it’s consistent. I asked you to have Tungspen close the last deal of one of Rossi’s regular buyers, with the estimating price starting ten thousand higher.”

Black Mask pushes Tim’s hand aside, and Tim tries not to pull it back too obviously, tries to make sure his body language stays casual.

Black Mask says, “They went for the higher price without much fuss, meaning that Rossi’s been asking for higher prices than he’s telling me.”

Tim nods, and finally lets himself take that step backwards, away from the desk. He lets out a slow breath, watching the unmoving black mesh eyes like he could somehow divine Black Mask’s facial expression.

“How confident are you?” Black Mask asks.

Tim pauses as if he’s considering it. He’s already worked out the odds.

“Six to one, right now,” he says. “Rossi will resent being investigated, if he’s innocent, so I can keep an eye on it and let you know if anything else develops.”

“No,” Black Mask says. “If Rossi’s been doing this, he won’t just be doing it for spare cash. See if you can find out what he’s been doing with the money, and get back to me next week. He’ll need to be replaced.”

Black Mask’s men are the biggest unknown Tim has to work with, frankly. For all Black Mask is good at moving them like pawns, Tim doesn’t *know* them, not beyond his guards. The numbers will say Rossi’s taking money, but Tim doesn’t know him well, and he’s going to have to systematically scour his records to try and figure out what it’s for.

The idea of a replacement is an interesting one. Tim’s familiar with most of Black Mask’s lieutenants, knows at least the operations they tend to get pulled in for, and who gets trusted with the bigger moves or the more minor ones. He’s not sure any of them are going to be at all helpful in terms of managing weapons trade, so it might not be worth giving anyone the extra power of another branch of Black Mask’s operations to oversee.

“The new head of the guys near St. Bernard’s might be useful to start moving up,” Tim says, then slams his mouth shut.

Black Mask looks up, and Tim wishes he could swallow his own tongue.

At this point, Black Mask doesn’t need to vocalize the request for elaboration; it’s implicit in the way he leans back, tilts his head.

“They’re more volatile than some of our others,” Tim says, squashing the reluctance out of his voice. “Mostly, that’s ‘cause they’re in contention with a bunch of other minor gangs. With some oversight and a firm hand, they’ll be a great tool for taking out their opponents.”

The tilt of Black Mask’s head rightens. He sounds pleased when he says, “That’s not a half bad idea, Tim.”

The way he says Tim's name always makes it sound like he's speaking to a child. Not—it's not *condescending*, that's not the right word for it.

Black Mask says it like he's putting on the performance of praise, of pride. Trying to reinforce the right behaviors. Making it clear to Tim when he's doing well.

The trouble is, this time, Tim *is* doing well. For Black Mask, at least.

The guys from St. Bernard's, with a little growth and guidance, will be an incredible tool in Black Mask's hands. They're well-positioned to offer access to a number of spots for small business deals, especially regarding drug trades. The move that joined them to Black Mask's organization proved they were capable of setting goals, and – more importantly – capable of being content with accomplishing them.

The right amount of ambition is hard to come by in criminals, and unfortunately, Tim's just found it.

Tim can see Black Mask considering it as he leans back. It is a good move.

It's not a move Tim would've suggested, if he'd thought it through. It's genuinely the best move to make.

Tim has just made Black Mask's criminal empire a little bit sturdier.

He still half-expects the wash of guilt that used to accompany doing this. It's there, but distant, like looking at something through muddy water. The copper taste of guilt is overpowered by the bitterness of frustration.

Tim feels like he's just watched Black Mask take one of his bishops off the board. His own slip-up is annoying, more than anything. It will make the rest of this harder.

He levels his gaze at the papers spread across the desk. He knows he should feel guilty. It's not a good thing, that the guilt is a distant, faded feeling nowadays.

He can feel guilty later. Once he's not going to have to make any more bad decisions ever again.

Tim's finishing breakfast when Tack sets the laptop, updated for today's news, on the kitchen counter. Tim hums a wordless thank-you as Tack goes back to his post by the door, balancing his bowl of cereal in the palm of one hand as he opens the laptop and jams a finger into the power button with all the ease of a morning routine.

There's a shortcut to a police report on the desktop that wasn't there yesterday.

Tim opens it cautiously. Black Mask only flags things for him in particular if it's exceptionally relevant—if it's the results of an operation Tim was planning, or something unexpected for Batman, or something Black Mask is going to be asking Tim to think up solutions for.

It's a closed investigations report. Closed last night.

Tim normally gets the updates of investigation reports as they happen. If he's only seeing this one now, it's because Black Mask's been withholding it from him.

The investigation is called *The Heir Candidates*, and Tim can't tell if the bitter taste on his tongue

is hope or dread.

The report opens with detailing different rumors of kids at Black Mask's meetings. Three different descriptions, all teenagers: a fat brunette girl later in her teens, a tall blond boy with a narrow face, and a short, scrawny black-haired boy with dark eyes, the youngest of the three. Each appearing in front of Black Mask's lieutenants more than once, if the accounts are to be believed.

Tim had known it would be impossible to keep everything secret, among Black Mask's foot soldiers, when they started seeing him. He'd been hoping Black Mask was using fear as his only countermeasure.

He has a sinking feeling he knows how this investigation report ends. Where exactly it closes.

At the bottom of the report: *prisoners retrieved by Batman and Nightwing. Firsthand accounts of their experiences and debriefing attached.*

There are three accounts attached. Rebecca Stern, Paul Nikolwai, and Thomas Dawley. All three heir candidates rescued and recovered and returned to their parents.

Thomas Dawley. Thirteen years old, missing for five months. Four foot ten inches tall, approximately ninety pounds. Dark hair, brown eyes. He doesn't *look* like Tim, but that's not the point. Anything Tim could be described as, so could Thomas Dawley.

Except that Tim's a genius, and Thomas isn't.

Tim doesn't shut his eyes. He stares at the top of Thomas Dawley's file, the date of disappearance and date of recovery.

He'd already known Batman wouldn't be coming for him. It's been long enough that Batman couldn't *possibly* know. If he knew, he'd still be looking.

Batman won't be coming to his rescue. Batman thinks he already *has*.

It doesn't change anything, Tim reminds himself. He crumples up the disappointment, the defeat that he could wallow in, and he swallows it down, and goes back to his cereal.

It's Drew who gets to be the bearer of Tim's next present.

He sets it down on the table next to the pot of soup Tim's eating directly out of, drums his fingers against the casing, and says, "Present from the boss."

Tim feels his attention narrow down to tunnel vision. He stares at the sleek gray flip phone like he's waiting for it to explode.

If Drew says anything else, Tim doesn't hear it, doesn't even register him walking away. He scoops the phone up, the plastic cool against his palm, and flips it open.

A data connection. This phone has a *data connection*.

It also has a bastardized keypad. The tiny number buttons Tim expects have been stripped out; he looks at the remaining keys with some trepidation.

Enter, back, four arrow keys. A green call key, and a red one to hang up.

Tim hits enter. It opens the menu.

The phone has Tetris.

Tim grins, but he squashes down the glee and makes himself open the contacts. There's only a single contact. **BM.**

Tim hits call.

The motion of holding the phone up to his ear is strangely foreign. It feels like Tim is pantomiming something he's only ever watched other people do—he hasn't touched a phone in three years, and he's only really ever called his parents, when they were away.

It rings twice before Tim hears the line click.

Black Mask doesn't say anything for the first several seconds, so Tim asks, "What's the occasion?"

It's odd to hear the level tone of Black Mask's voice filtered through the crunchy phone speaker. "I figured it would make it easier to inform me of developments for the operations I'm adding to your plate."

More? Black Mask—he can't be serious.

Tim's been managing his weapons trades into, out of, and within Gotham for eight months now. It's become less time-consuming the longer he's working on it, and he's managed to get rid of a few of the more dangerous sellers—like those future-tech guns from Norway.

"I was just gonna ask for a Gameboy for my fifteenth birthday," Tim's mouth says, while his brain is still pulling threads together and playing catch-up.

There's no amusement to Black Mask's voice. "I'm sending more notes on my operations. Some of the more sensitive plans: R&D, sell-outs in the justice system, that sort of thing."

Tim swallows down the thing in his chest that swells with eagerness. Black Mask *isn't* allowed to win. Tim will perform the appearance of the perfect heir and keep the resentment festering in his chest.

It's just not so much resentment these days as it is determination.

"What new operations am I handling?" Tim asks.

"I want to expand our territory to the south, but there's a prominent drug cartel in our way. Figure out how to edge them out of business and out of town."

That's—less than Tim was expecting.

Black Mask adds, "You'll have some other assignments, too, though smaller and more specific. Those will be sent by text. I'll give you the chance to read up on the additional files before we get into that."

"Alright," Tim says.

"I'll see you for our regular meeting time," Black Mask says, and hangs up.

Tim clicks the clamshell shut.

The first text he receives on his phone is two days later, at 12:01am.

Happy birthday.

Tim goes to delete it, and stops himself.

Best to leave it for appearances. In case Black Mask checks it. That's all.

Tim's a month into his plan for shuffling the neighboring drug cartel aside, and he's balanced a couple other requests on the side; determining what tech on a Justice League transport was worth taking for R&D, how to best pin down and blackmail a judge, that kind of stuff.

He's eyeing up the power structure of the drug cartel, pinned up on his second corkboard, looking for flaws. Tim's deep enough in thought that he almost misses the ping of his cellphone, in the next room on the kitchen counter.

What he's working on isn't going to be lost inside his head if he leaves it here, so he goes to check.

The text reads, **Trafficking export. Arrange exchange by railway between Wed and Sat to Denby.**

It takes him a second read to fully comprehend it, and nausea swells. Tim presses his free hand flat to the cool marble countertop to steady himself, ground himself.

His first instinct is *NO*. He's done a lot of terrible things for Black Mask, helped him ruin lives and kill innocents—Tim knows he has, even if he's never seen it firsthand, and he's doing his best to mitigate the damage, but damage at all is inevitable.

But directing weapon and drug trade are things where Tim *can* mitigate the damage. He can try and turn guns against each other; he can direct the flow of drugs to districts that have better support, or at least away from Gotham's most vulnerable populations.

Human trafficking is a no-win game for Tim. The only thing he can do to mitigate it is to *stop* it. And Tim can't do that.

He can't. Guilt fills his chest like water bubbling from an underground spring; the new atrocities don't draw it up as strongly, but the wound of Black Mask's first punishment never really healed. If Tim stops the human trafficking, Black Mask will kill more of his men. Blood on Tim's hands.

There's blood on Tim's hands either way. Innocent lives in trafficking, or the men Batman will catch.

Tim knows which one he wants to choose.

He lets his head drop and closes his eyes. When is Nightwing most likely to be in Gotham? He's in Blüdhaven more often than not nowadays, but Tim needs to figure out which patrol pattern will be happening.

He needs a sure bet. He *needs* to make sure Batman catches the trafficking exchange. Tim's not going to pretend this was an accident, not going to leave it up to chance.

He's just lucky Batman and Nightwing still have semi-rotating schedules. Black Mask needs Tim to figure out the week-by-week of their schedules, which means he has to accept whichever patrol route Tim tells him a night will be. The formula's useful, but Tim's the key that can translate it into reality.

It takes him a few minutes to conclude he needs more information. Tim pulls up the newspapers on the laptop, looking for potential reasons Dick Grayson might have to be in or out of Gotham this weekend.

He doesn't have to do much more than check the date. Alfred's birthday is Thursday.

Now comes the actual research that he'd have to do. What train operators they can pay off, which cargo trains will be running. Where they'll be stopping. The practicalities.

All in all, it takes him five hours to do his homework and screw up the courage to call Black Mask for the plan.

Black Mask picks up on the first ring.

Tim flattens his voice until no hint of anything can creep in. "Friday, 2:27AM on the freight train GN104. Get the cargo on board before the train departs."

The word *cargo* tastes like ash in his mouth. Tim says it anyway.

"That was quick," Black Mask says.

Oh, fuck. Tim recognizes that tone of voice.

It occurs to him, suddenly, that Black Mask had probably been expecting pushback. He didn't think Tim would just cave, just like that. He anticipated having to persuade Tim, even though he and Tim both know what that persuasion would look like.

Tim lets the taste of ash fill his mouth, and his voice is flinty when he says, "Don't give me assignments like this ever again. I hate it."

And then he hangs up.

Okay. He swallows back down the spike of anger. He needed it for the performance, but it won't do him any good to hold onto it.

How many people are going to die for what Tim did? How many of them is he going to have to watch?

He presses the phone down into the counter with one hand and squeezes his eyes shut. None of them will be innocents. None of them will be *victims*.

That will be enough. That will have to be enough.

Tim eats Friday night's leftover takeout for breakfast on Saturday, though he doesn't have much of an appetite.

The two guards by his door – Drew and Tack – eye him a little nervously when he doesn't even spare a glance at the updated files on the laptop. Tim sets the flip phone on the center of the kitchen counter and does his best not to stare at it.

The guards don't know how badly last night went for the operation Tim planned. The guards don't know Batman and Nightwing probably annihilated at least a dozen of Black Mask's men and brick-walled an exchange of human traffickers, so that Black Mask will have to deal with lost prisoners on top of the irritation of his buyers.

The guards don't know Tim's waiting for the phone to ring so he can get the punishment of the day over with.

Tim gives up on eating pretty quickly. He shoves the rest of the leftovers back in the fridge. He *should* eat, because he's definitely not going to have an appetite after whatever Black Mask does, but he can't bring himself to.

The phone keeps not ringing.

Tim retreats to the living room, where the guards can't stare at him without leaving their post. He flips open the phone.

It's been four years since Tim's played Tetris. He gets through two games and is starting on his third when the door opens.

He's enjoying Tetris so much it takes him several seconds longer than it should to recognize that the door doesn't usually just open.

Tim was expecting a summons, not a visit. He closes the phone and stands as Black Mask steps into the living room.

He hates that his apartments aren't safe anymore. Sure, it had always been an illusion—but it was one Tim *liked*. One he wanted. He hates that Black Mask has gotten into the habit of coming and going as he wants.

"Do you want to start, or should I?" Black Mask asks him.

Tim tosses the flip phone onto his armchair. He draws himself up to his full height – getting closer to Black Mask's, these days – and says, "If you're expecting an apology, be disappointed."

"I did expect the rebellion," Black Mask says. "You don't understand the necessity of what I do, sometimes."

It's such a disgustingly polite way to put it.

Being angry is the correct response here. As weird as it is, Tim has to be careful about how calculating he allows himself to be.

"Fuck you," Tim says, allowing the rage to heat his voice. "I've *looked* at your finances. You can afford to not sell other people."

"Tim." Black Mask's voice is stone cold. "I'm going to be honest with you."

He steps forward. Tim can't help the instinctive half-step back—he regrets it immediately, the display of fear, but he hates being near Black Mask.

"The reason we're not doing another display where I shoot my men," Black Mask says, "is because Batman and Nightwing interrupted a minor drug shipment. You'd been telling me Circe was unreliable for ages anyway, and now she's in prison."

The façade of Tim's anger drops like a flame going out. Black Mask *lied*. It was a test. It was a test, and Tim failed.

Why would he construct it as a test? Why do it if he expected Tim to disobey him? It makes no sense; he doesn't sound like he's going to be attaching a punishment, teaching Tim a lesson, so *why*?

"Why?" Tim asks.

Black Mask takes another step forward. Tim isn't paying enough attention to remember to step back.

Black Mask grabs his wrist, and Tim's train of thought stops like someone hit the pause button.

He doesn't hurt Tim, not anymore. He's—that's not part of their games. They use threats and control, not violence. Black Mask doesn't *need* violence to control him.

Tim doesn't understand.

Black Mask twists his wrist hard enough that Tim can't hide his gasp, and uses the painful angle to shove Tim down into his favorite armchair.

"Tim," Black Mask says, cold and sharp, "we've played this game before."

The pain is sharp enough that Tim's forcibly grounded, his thoughts unable to scramble away. It takes most of his focus to drag his eyes up to Black Mask's face and say, "Y-yeah. We have."

"What's the rule?" Black Mask asks.

Tim swallows. The cold resentment in his chest, often so distant, burns. Tim is a *prisoner*.

"You always win," Tim says, and he makes sure his voice shakes.

"Right," Black Mask says. "Prolonging that just *hurts*."

He twists Tim's wrist as he speaks, and Tim can't help the wince in his face, but he smooths it back over as fast as he can.

The longer they hold like this, Black Mask looming over him, the better Tim gets at ignoring the pain. His brain begins to think again, spinning out plans, like a mouse daring to creep back out under the shadow of a predator.

Black Mask says, "If there's a next time, Tim, you will lose a finger. I promise." He digs a thumb into the palm of Tim's hand, forcing the inward curl of his fingers. "A finger, every time."

Tim stares at the unflinching black-mesh eyes.

"I understand," he says hollowly.

It's not that he's not scared. Tim's *terrified*. He never really got over that fear of Black Mask, not since the beginning. But as Black Mask comes in and out of his apartment now, as he hangs over Tim's life dark as a storm cloud, Tim can't just let the fear win every time.

Tim swallows, and Black Mask lets go of his wrist and steps back.

It would feel better to remain unflinching, to sit there silent and unmoved, but Black Mask wants

the performance of submission—or at least, of fear. So Tim cradles his aching wrist close to his chest, and draws his knees up, shoving his way to the back of the armchair.

Tim's going to lose a finger.

Depending on how he plays this, Tim might lose a couple before he can do anything about it. He draws a breath in, count of four, and out on a count of eight. He doesn't look away from Black Mask.

Okay. He's going to lose a finger. That's a fact of his future.

Tim's careful to make sure the determination of it doesn't make it on his face. He flicks his eyes away from Black Mask, down to the floor. He flexes his throat so his voice is shaky when he says, "I'm—I'll do the next one."

"Tim." Black Mask waits until he looks back up, and says, "I always win."

Tim closes his eyes, and nods.

The performance of fear makes it feel a little sharper in his veins. If he was at least *acting* defiance, he could shove the fear down.

Soon, Tim thinks, forehead pressed against his knees. Next time, or at least the time after that.

He's not going to lose more than three fingers. He can do that much.

Black Mask's heavy footsteps leave. The door slams behind him, and Tim listens to the locks being redone.

Tim opens his eyes. Black Mask left a sheet of paper on the coffee table. He uncurls from his hunched position, stretches out his arms, and leans over to grab it.

His next assignment.

Tim's guards don't question the sudden development of his silence. Normally, he talks on and off—they're the only company he gets, after all, because he's certainly never just *talking* with Black Mask.

He's fairly confident they talk between themselves, when he's off in another room. Or else Black Mask has them doing briefs on him, which isn't unlikely either. Either way, what one of them knows, the rest will, eventually.

Tim isn't sure if they talk about Black Mask's visit from earlier this week. They don't have to, after all—the bruised imprint of a hand wrapped around his wrist tells them everything they'd need to know.

So Tim's quiet, and no one asks him why.

Tim has his next assignment pinned to one of his corkboards. He keeps picking at it—where Batman and Nightwing will reliably be, what plan is plausible enough for Black Mask to not expect a betrayal. He's not exactly in a hurry to get it done, because once he has a time and a place, he's going to have to gamble on the rest. Figuring out Batman's schedule is the *easy* part of this plan.

Tim needs a card he can pull that will make Black Mask angry. He needs a way to destroy this next assignment so fully and completely that Black Mask doesn't even give him another one.

There's a couple ways Tim could do that. But none of them involve submissiveness—for this to work, Tim can't compromise. He has to set a line and stand his ground.

He can't just *decide* to do that and get away with it. If he could, he'd have already done it. So instead, he's left combing through the documents on the laptop, recent and old, news articles and gossip magazines and GCPD investigation reports.

Tim just needs a *hint* of power. Not much. A thread he can hold onto.

It's exhausting, demoralizing, and time-consuming. Tim closes the article he has open and scrubs at his strained eyes with the heel of one hand. He has no idea how long he's been at it, but he had an idea about leads not too long ago, and he'll have some motivation to keep trying tomorrow if he can find even the tiniest hint of another lead.

For however long now – since lunch, but lunch might've been dinner, Tim's terrible at keeping track – he's been reading through documents surrounding the time periods of major moves that Black Mask has taken, as well as in the periods following. He's trying to see if the papers or the magazines or the government makes note of surprising financial success, personality changes, company acquisitions. Black Mask has at least one front for what he's doing, some white-collar business he can stash money legally, if he needs to.

The title of an article catches Tim's eye. It's from a less reputable paper, one he didn't have a hard copy of—but dated during Tim's time actively assisting Black Mask.

Janus Cosmetics to Exceed Budget, it says.

Of course, it could be nothing. A single company in Gotham, overspending.

Tim clicks on the article, skims it. Janus Cosmetics.

Who runs that, again?

Tim is sitting on a stool in the kitchen when he hears the locks start being undone.

The nervousness bouncing in his stomach lurches into fear. He won't show it. He *won't*. If he shows it, Black Mask wins today.

If he shows fear, Tim's going to lose more than just one finger.

Last night, a *very* pricey trafficking deal went south. About as far south as it could've. Not only did Batman and Nightwing catch Black Mask's men and rescue their victims, they arrived late enough in the deal that they managed to get enough information on the buyers to effectively chase down and expose a mob in the next city over. If Tim's right, news of *that* has already made it out of Gotham, and trying to convince anyone it's worth the risk of buying Gotham's trafficking exports is going to be more difficult than ever.

The last lock – of seven, now, since Tim's getting better – is the biometric, and it beeps open quietly. The heavy metal door swings open, and the light from beyond the door slants into the unlit hallway of Tim's apartment.

He sees Black Mask's silhouette, curls every single ounce of his fear up into a ball, and shoves it as deep as he can.

Black Mask's footsteps are even, in his black dress shoes. His suit is immaculate, as always, and the sharp black edge of it holds Tim's attention like the edge of a knife.

Hm. Poor choice of metaphor.

Black Mask stops in the entryway of the kitchen.

Before he says anything at all, Tim says, "I won't do it." His voice is steel, stone. His voice is uncompromising.

An act of defiance.

Black Mask takes slow, even steps towards him. His voice is, for maybe the first time, *angry*. "You're going to regret it," he warns lowly.

"Sure," says Tim, brazen, reckless. He's overcompensating for the fear, but he needs to. "But you can't make me."

Black Mask stops next to Tim. He's close enough that the fear response in the back of Tim's brain is in overdrive, telling Tim to back away, to run, to cower. Anything to protect himself.

Tim's in control. Tim knows *exactly* how this visit is going to go.

Tim reaches for the knife block next to the microwave. Tim pulls out his sharpest kitchen knife. Never used. He turns it in his hands and holds it out, handle first.

Tim knows exactly how this is going to go.

If Black Mask is unnerved by the display, his body language doesn't show it. Tim wishes, not for the first time, that he could see his fucking face. That he could *see* what he's thinking.

Tim's two guards of the day are hovering uncomfortably in his periphery. Neither of them look pleased, really, but since Tim's complying, they won't have to be a part of this.

Black Mask doesn't take the knife.

Instead, he reaches beneath the offered handle, and grab the wrist of Tim's empty left hand. Panic is shrieking like an alarm somewhere in the back of Tim's mind, but his entire body is tense, firmly under his control. He doesn't so much as flinch.

Black Mask presses Tim's hand onto the cold marble counter of the kitchen island, palm up. Black Mask splays his fingers out, and holds his hand there. It's not tight enough that Tim couldn't escape, but the pressure is a firm presence.

"If you're so determined," he says, "you do it."

Tim's confidence stutters. He grabs it tightly, forces it to hold out. He *won't* show fear.

He turns the knife in his grasp, and turns his body in towards the counter. It makes Black Mask feel like he's looming more, placing him at Tim's side rather than directly in front of him, his arm stretched out in front of him to hold Tim's hand down. Tim puts it out of his mind.

Tim's voice is unmoved when he asks, "Which finger?"

He might not be able to see Black Mask's face, but the weight of his gaze is undeniable. Tim makes sure his face is completely neutral—no hint of fear, of anything but steely determination. He won't compromise, on this.

Black Mask uses his other hand to pick up Tim's other wrist, the one holding the knife. He guides it until the edge of the blade presses into the tender inside of the second knuckle of Tim's ring finger. He curls Tim's pinky in, out of the way. It forces tension into his ring finger, and the knife bites into the tendon on the inside of the knuckle.

Tim draws a breath in, on a count of four. Out on eight. His hand is sweaty.

He feels he ought to give some dramatic statement. Final words, as it were. One last refusal.

Instead, in the expectant silence of his apartment, Tim turns his head, and looks Black Mask in the face. They're so close he might be able to feel Black Mask's breath, if not for the bared black teeth of the mask.

He brings the knife down.

Tim can't help the flinch—his shoulders curl inward, his jaw tightens, a gasp presses out between his lips without his permission.

The knife clinks against the cold marble countertop, on the other side of his finger.

Tim's breathing has sped up. Fuck, it hurts. Jesus *Christ* it hurts. He feels lightheaded, dizzy. He's losing blood, he's sure, even though he's not looking at his finger. He hopes the cut was clean enough. He's not sure he's got the guts to finish sawing through it, if one cut wasn't enough.

He keeps his eyes trained on Black Mask.

"I won't," Tim says, between his gritted teeth, and is surprised to hear how cold and even his voice sounds.

"We'd best not let that bleed," Black Mask says. He pulls the knife from Tim's grasp.

Tim still hasn't turned his head, but the knife is bloody. He feels odd, distant.

No. This is no time to disassociate. The dizzying pain and unreality of it would make it easy, but he can't. Tim has to be here. Tim has to stay focused.

Black Mask turns the gas stove on. Tim watches him hold the knife over the flame, and the dizziness twists to nausea.

It's okay, he reminds himself. This is all just pain. The pain will be temporary.

The loss of a finger won't be, the panic insists. And Tim lets it—it's right, and denying it now will just make it bubble up later. He's lost a finger. He has to understand that and process it before he can move on to planning.

The blood from the knife sizzles as it burns off. Tim watches the metal begin to redden, just so faintly. Black Mask pulls it from the flame, and steps back over to Tim.

Tim hasn't moved his hand from the counter. He thinks his other fingers are starting to grow slick with blood, but it's hard to tell, because most of his awareness of his left hand is just the pain and dull pulse of blood as it leaves his body, and he's still not looking.

The metal dulls, from red back to shining gunmetal gray, and Black Mask puts his hand back over Tim's wrist to hold it down.

He presses the flat blade of the knife to the wound, and Tim *screams*.

Tim's knees give out, and the only thing that keeps him from hitting the floor is Black Mask's unyielding grip on his wrist. He gasps for breath, his upper arm pressed awkwardly against the edge of the counter, and screams again when Black Mask presses the knife back.

The pain is overwhelming. Tim's mind goes white, his entire body narrowed down to the agony of it. He's only vaguely aware that he's choking down air and tears are building in his eyes.

Black Mask lets go, and Tim lands on his back on the kitchen tile, clutching his hand to his chest.

Somehow, that hurt so much fucking more than losing the finger did. It still does, burning, and Tim digs his nails into his uninjured palm hard enough to bleed, to draw his attention away from it.

He isn't sure how long he lies there, vision white with pain, unable to think past it. Awareness creeps back in slowly, unsteadily, and Tim blinks away the tears that somehow haven't spilled over.

Okay. Breathe. Black Mask is still here. It hurts, but he can't let that be the only thing in his head.

He has to make sure this works.

In on four, out on eight. Tim lets himself lie on his back until he can get his breathing under control, and then he sits up. He has to wipe away the dampness clinging to his eyelashes, but his tears never actually fell. He grabs at the edge of the counter with his good hand, and pulls himself back onto his feet.

Black Mask is standing, impassive. There's red blood on his white gloves, and that's probably the only reason he hasn't tucked them into his pockets.

There's a lot of blood on the counter. The sight of the other half of Tim's finger, lying there on the countertop, makes the dizziness come rushing back, and he forces himself to look away.

"That was more fun than I thought it'd be," Black Mask says.

Oh, Tim's got more than enough reasons to remind himself why he can't like Black Mask.

"Glad you enjoyed yourself," he manages in response, the words a little heavy with his breathing.

It's hard to hold his control over the fear when the pain amplifies it, makes it stronger. But Tim makes himself stand straighter, uncurls his shoulders, puts his hands at his sides. He tilts his chin back and meets Black Mask's gaze.

He's still breathing too fast, but it evens out as he focuses on it, as he makes himself calm down.

"Are we done here?" Tim asks.

He doesn't miss the minute jerk of Black Mask's hands. His fingers half-curl, twisting the red-stained leather tight over his knuckles.

"Not quite," Black Mask says, and Tim feels victory spike through him at the sound of the frustration in Black Mask's voice.

The joy of hearing that is strong enough that he almost forgets the pain. Frustration means Tim has control. Frustration means Tim is *winning*.

It's a struggle to keep the smile off his face.

Sure, frustrating Black Mask is dangerous. It makes it clear that Tim's capable of playing on a level field—that fear and guilt and pain won't be enough to keep him in line forever.

But oh, it's been so *long* since Tim felt like he was in control. Since Tim had the power to do anything at all. His hand still hurts, and he's going to have to clean his own severed finger and spilt blood off the kitchen counter before he can cook dinner, but the insanity of it all is that it will be *worth it*.

Black Mask peels off his gloves, one at a time, careful so that his bare skin doesn't touch the bloodstains. He drops them in the puddle of blood on the counter, and in some ways it's cathartic to focus on the way the leather slowly stains and mats red.

It's easier to focus on than Black Mask's bare hands. Tim realizes, abruptly, that he's never seen Black Mask's skin before.

Black Mask uses his clean hands to pull a piece of paper, folded into thirds, from the inside of his suit jacket. He holds it out to Tim.

"Your next assignment," Black Mask says.

"No," Tim says, automatically. Tim knows exactly how the entirety of today is going to go, and his plans included this—the new trafficking assignment Black Mask is going to demand he complete.

"Tim," Black Mask says. His voice is sharp, but Tim can say with confidence it's still not as sharp as a knife.

"We just did this," Tim says. "I won't."

Black Mask sighs, theatrical. He turns his back, starts to walk slowly and evenly back towards the door.

"I'll leave it here," he says, tilting his hand so the edge of the paper is about to rest on the un-bloodied half of the kitchen island.

Tim won't let him win.

"Sionis," he says aloud.

Power is the way Black Mask's entire body freezes. The name floods Tim's mouth like cold water, sharp and clear and grounding. Black Mask's head snaps over to him.

The piece of paper hovers in the air, not yet set down.

"Your name," Tim says. "It's Roman Sionis."

The paper crumples in Black Mask's fist. He crosses the kitchen in two strides and punches Tim in the face.

Tim stumbles and falls back against the kitchen cupboards, too lightheaded from the loss of his finger to stay upright. The pain he's in barely registers, insignificant beneath the elation. It doesn't

matter what else Black Mask does to him—he won't hurt Tim permanently, not in any way that really matters. Tim's too valuable for that.

Tim has been scraping out handholds with his fingernails. Tim has something to hold onto. Whatever else Sionis does, he can't take this away from Tim.

There's a man under the mask. And maybe that should make Tim scared, that a man is capable of the terrible things that Sionis has done, but it just makes him feel relieved.

All these years, and there's no monster.

Tim slides down the cabinets until he's sitting on the floor, tips his head back, and *laughs*.

Roman Sionis leaves, and he takes his stupid piece of paper with him.

Chapter End Notes

CH4 content warnings: mutilation, mentions of human trafficking

oh, i had the time of my life writing this!! one of the most fun chapters for me to write

also, you may have noticed, but this work is now part of a series! i'm already working on another fic in this AU. it won't be going up for several weeks still, but flag the series if you want to be notified for it!

leave kudos, comment, or bookmark, whatever floats your boat, and i'll see you next week!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tim has a new corkboard.

It's the fourth corkboard in his apartment, and it's the emptiest.

If Sionis asks, Tim will tell him it's for tracking things. He has pinned up lists of Black Mask's lieutenants, another map of Black Mask's territories. Lists of other major criminal organizations, either geographically close, or running in the same major trades that Black Mask is. Markers and notations of the separate gangs and factions under Black Mask's control, the way they interact.

If Sionis asks, Tim will say it got to be too much to hold in his head. He's pretty sure he's played his cards well enough that Sionis will believe him.

In truth, Tim has no such issues. The corkboard is the best visualization he has, and being able to lay out some of the information on the board means he can do other work in his head.

Namely, the thinking and planning he'll need to figure out invisibly, to bring Black Mask down.

The name Roman Sionis was the last thing Tim needed. With that, his ability to track Black Mask's movements through Gotham City is nearly complete, including the public persona the newspapers will talk about. Tim's sure there are still some gaps in his knowledge, but he'll never know if he's caught them all, so he's going to work with what he has.

The plans Tim can make in order to escape are limited. His own physical escape is actually the least likely—Sionis hasn't given him an apartment with windows since that first one, and there are *eight* locks on the door now. Tim's got impressive agility and ability to dodge, in a fight, thanks to the practice of his Friday night escape attempts, but he stands no chance at being able to take even one of his guards out.

Tim's old enough that he's pretty sure he's not going to get more than a few inches taller, and his current five-foot-two is hardly ideal for an untrained combatant.

When he was younger, Tim fantasized about somehow talking his guards into letting him escape. Now that he knows Sionis, and Black Mask's reputation, he knows the likelihood of that working.

The most foolproof plan – and the one that will begin to balance all the terrible things Tim has been a tool for – is simple: destroy Black Mask's entire operation. Even if someone else takes over Tim's imprisonment for a while, none of Black Mask's underlings or competition pose the same challenge to Tim.

It's the most foolproof plan, but it's maybe the hardest. If Tim were nearly anyone else, it'd be impossible.

He can't do it by half measures. Sionis cut off a finger at Tim's last defiance; if Tim fails at this, and gets caught trying to destroy him, Sionis will cut off Tim's head.

Tim gets one shot. He has to make sure it's lethal.

He has to make sure it's *perfect*.

So he can't do anything that could tip Sionis off. He has to continue making Black Mask the strongest crime boss in the entirety of Gotham, and he has to do it in a way that prevents Batman from getting in his way.

He has to keep building Black Mask's strength, and then he has to collapse it all in a single night.

Well. Rome wasn't built in a day, but maybe it could be razed in one.

"You've been doing exceptionally, Tim," Black Mask says approvingly.

He's sat at his desk, in Tim's study. He has folders of reports in front of him—folders that prove how well Tim's most recent plans have been going.

For the first time since working for Sionis, Tim *is* doing his best. His results are clearly shown: the rapid expansion of Black Mask's territory to the south, the deals with the Penguin intended to eventually undercut his operations, the proactive but contained efforts of underlings.

Tim smothers the flash of pride beneath a sense of satisfaction. The emotions look the same, but focusing on the satisfaction means focusing on Tim's plan. It might be nice to have his full capabilities recognized, but he's got a purpose beyond just optimizing the amount of crime he can get away with.

His work doesn't even really involve Batman that much, anymore. A third of the time, the patrol routes seem completely random—it's how Bruce is countering having someone capable of tracking him. Tim can still determine certain windows on certain nights – either when he needs Batman, or when he doesn't – but overall, he's running a crime operation like anybody else in Gotham.

Well. Nobody else in Gotham is running a crime operation that isn't *theirs*.

"The benefits of cooperation," Tim says. He taps the stump of his left ring finger pointedly against his thigh.

Black Mask hasn't given him a single assignment involving trafficking. It's a victory Tim reminds him of a little more than he should—playing up the arrogant teenager, blinded by his own success.

He expects a smart remark in exchange, or at least an acknowledgement of some kind. He's not expecting Sionis to lean back in his chair, the folders barely touched, and watch Tim.

"You're aware that you are my successor," Sionis says, after several long seconds.

Where he's standing in front of the desk, Tim goes still. He hopes it looks like surprise—it is, a little bit. This discussion is sooner than he expected. Is there a reason he's not aware of? Has he been planning for Sionis' expectations to be higher than they actually are?"

He cuts off the calculation and says, "Um. Mostly."

"Mostly?" Sionis prompts.

Tim shrugs one shoulder. "I know I've been a—a work in progress."

He isn't sure if that's too telling. If he knows he's being groomed, the odds of it taking are just that little bit smaller.

"That's a diminutive way to put it," Sionis says, and Tim can hear the curl of a half-smile in his

voice. “We’ve been building trust between us. We know each other’s limits.”

Their limits are a line drawn in blood.

Tim doesn’t bother smiling. He lets a little suspicion slide into his voice when he asks, “Why did you bring this up?”

He’s gotten to be a very good liar. Won’t his parents be proud.

“I want to make it official,” Sionis says.

Official. What does that mean? It won’t be Janus Cosmetics—Sionis’ underground business is likely the only reason he can keep the front afloat, and besides all of that, Tim’s still legally a missing person.

Less than a year left until he legally becomes a dead one.

Official to Black Mask’s lieutenants? They know, mostly—but this might be a display of power, for some reason. Tim hasn’t seen anything that would indicate Black Mask would need one, but he doesn’t handle the day-to-day of working with them, so his predictions there are more limited.

Tim swallows down the questions before the silence stretches too far. “Okay,” he says. Then, with enough of the truth that it stings to say: “Not like I’m ever going to go back to a normal life anyway.”

He can have *most* of one. But Tim’s smart enough to suspect he’s developed some habits that he won’t ever really be able to turn off. It’s a problem for later, when Tim will have freedom and a really good therapist he can bribe into extra-legal confidentiality, if he needs to.

It’s got enough of the truth in it to convince Sionis, either way.

“Excellent,” Sionis says, in the sharp, pleased tone of a good deal closed. It’s a tone Tim still recognizes from weekdays spent watching Janet Drake work, a lifetime ago.

Sionis gets up, and Tim holds back the fear so that he stays perfectly stationary while Sionis circles around the desk to stand in front of him.

“We have an important meeting tonight,” Sionis says. “I want you present, and I want you to help.” Something pretending to be paternal enters his voice as he adds, “I want you to show my men why they’re going to need to take you seriously.”

Tim—doesn’t know what this meeting’s going to be on. Sionis doesn’t rely fully on Tim for decisions; Tim can provide anything from the broad strokes of a plan to the minutiae of a specific night’s deals, but he usually doesn’t do both. Sionis still has meetings with his men, to discuss anything from who does what to who’s acting up to issues with rivals. That’s just part of the work of being a mob boss, as Tim understands it; there’s a certain demand to be the face of an operation that requires the genuine loyalty and deference of Black Mask’s forces.

“Sure,” Tim says.

Sionis’ voice is smiling behind those bared black teeth when he says, “I do have some new clothes for you, too. If you’re going to command respect, you ought to look it.”

Tim has been wearing sweatpants and cargo shorts for the last four years of his life. His T-shirts at least aren’t oversized anymore, but his sweaters definitely are. Tim has a single pair of practically

pristine sneakers that only get worn when he's dragged out.

Sionis is right—it's certainly no way to present himself as Black Mask's heir, so he lets himself be dragged along. Tim is presented with formal outfits, familiar from his other life in Gotham's socialite circles.

Tim picks out a white dress shirt and gunmetal grey slacks. He forgoes the tie, leaving the top two buttons undone. It's a socialite's wardrobe, but that's not the role he's playing.

It takes him a full minute to screw up the courage to pick up a pair of black gloves that are identical, in everything but color, to Black Mask's. He tugs them on and flexes his hands. The ring finger of the left hand glove is specifically tailored to fit perfectly against Tim's missing finger.

Tim pauses before he opens the door. This meeting is every bit as crucial as the act of defiance that cost him the finger, and he takes a moment to steel himself.

Tim's scared. He's nervous. He *worries*, and he can't afford to do that.

Compassion, nervousness, fear. As Black Mask's heir, they'd be the death of him. And Tim isn't going to be his heir, not really, but the act has to be perfect.

He picks up the fear, the nervousness, the compassion and morality that made him reject trafficking assignments. They're well-worn, river stones made smooth from time and consideration. Tim lets himself feel the weight of them, lets them rest against his heart so that he can still feel the ache.

He wraps them up, delicately. He sets them aside for later.

It's his own kind of mask.

He opens the door, and steps out. Across the hall, Sionis is leaning against the open doorframe that leads out to the hallway beyond Tim's apartment.

"Good choice," Sionis says neutrally. Tim can't see his eyes, but he knows Sionis is looking at the gloves.

Without needing a response, he turns and begins to walk out of the apartment. Tim flicks his eyes hesitantly to tonight's two guards, but neither of them move to blindfold him.

Huh.

Tim follows Sionis out of the apartment. The hallway beyond is just as windowless as the apartment, and the only things that aren't cream-white walls are the smooth steel doors of the elevator. Tim makes note that apparently, there's a large metal bar on the outside of the door, currently up out of the way. Forcing it open from the inside isn't going to be possible.

The elevator has a keypad, but no numbered floors. Sionis' shoulders shield whatever code he enters from Tim's view—eight digits long, by the number of keypresses, Tim can't help but notice.

The elevator takes them straight to an underground car park. Tim climbs onto the back seat, and one of his guards wedges in behind him. He *is* blindfolded for the drive, which isn't really unexpected; there's only so much freedom they can really give a prisoner.

Tim spends the drive slowly rubbing his fingers over his palms, feeling the fine, soft leather of the gloves. The texture is weird against his skin, and it's an easy, subtle motion that distracts him from

the familiar powerlessness of the car ride.

The car slows to a stop, and they take the blindfold off.

Tim climbs out of the car under his own power. He isn't hurried inside, like usual—Black Mask climbs out of the passenger seat, and he just stands there, attention focused on Tim.

It's a nicer street than Tim was expecting. High-end retail area; he doesn't know Gotham's layout well enough to match any of the darkened shop names to an actual address.

It's nighttime in Gotham – it always is, when they bring Tim anywhere – but there are still a few people he can make out, walking in pairs or small groups down the street. Tim watches them hurry between streetlights.

The thought of calling out for help occurs distantly, as much a fantasy as Tim spontaneously developing a superpower of invisibility.

Tim squares his shoulders, pulls the wistfulness off his face, and turns to look at Black Mask.

"Where are we headed?" he asks.

"One of my establishments," Black Mask says. His fingertips press against the back of Tim's shoulder, lightly, just enough pressure to turn him and guide him towards the restaurant the car pulled up beside.

From the front, the restaurant looks like it's only just closed—the front rows of lights are turned off, chairs up on the tables, but there's lights on further in. There's a second dining area, not visible from the front. Which is just as well, because this *definitely* looks like a mob meeting.

The room's occupants are well-dressed, and seated around a long, impressive table, but their body language, combined with their expressions, make their career choices unmistakable. In unison, they stand as Black Mask guides Tim into the room.

They're not wearing masks. That tips Tim off to their rank more than anything else—anyone who *works* for Black Mask, gets paid by him, wears a mask at meetings. If they're not wearing masks, they're the people in charge of entire branches of Black Mask's organization, people who take their cut and pay the rest to Black Mask.

Tim recognizes a few of these men by description or reputation—closest to the head of the table is Victor Zsasz, one of Black Mask's most intimidating right-hands, and Rupert Thorne, whose operations Tim has been keeping a specific eye on. Sean Whelan, the leader of the St. Bernard's group that Tim got promoted, is seated closer than he expected. There's only one woman, further down, and Tim makes note to figure out her name soon. Mobsters are more sexist than most, so if she's here, she'll be good at what she does. The eyepatch says she's survived in the business awhile already.

"Evening, gentlemen," Black Mask says, and they all sit again. He places both hands on Tim's shoulders, frames Tim in with the span of Black Mask's body like a backdrop behind him. "A few of you will recognize my new addition. I'd like to formally introduce Timothy Drake as my successor."

Tim lets himself look between Black Mask's most trusted—Zsasz and Whelan among them. He uses the opportunity to scan other faces in his periphery, but none of them indicate blatant frustration, anger, or surprise. He keeps his face blank, and makes sure he doesn't look at any one person too long.

“Timothy is a bright young man, who’s been helping with our work for several years now. He’s long since earned a seat at our table.” There’s a specific sort of non-parental pride in Black Mask’s voice, in that it’s not so much pride as it is a dare for anyone else to speak out against him. “The time is right, to get him involved.”

Someone in the room speaks up, and Tim’s initial reaction to their open mouth is a simple thought: *idiot*.

Then they say, “Is that ‘cause he’s an orphan now?” and Tim’s second reaction is to keep his face perfectly blank.

Tim hasn’t seen any news articles on *that*. But there’s a sudden tenseness in Black Mask, a slight tightness of his grip that should be hidden under the gloves, but isn’t because it’s making his fingertips dig into the muscle of Tim’s shoulders.

Which means it’s true.

Emotions too heavy and muddled to name flood through him like a tidal wave. Tim braces himself, lets it crash over him. His chest feels tight; he hears Black Mask’s response without making out any of the words, like he’s speaking in another room.

Jack and Janet Drake are dead.

The only sign Tim gives that this is surprising or upsetting is a heavy exhale.

He can’t grieve them here. The tidal wave rushes by, and Tim is already on the other side, in the stilling waters behind it. He makes himself put the grief away.

It’s not like he’s had parents for the last four years, not really. Distantly, maybe—he’s had the concept of them. They were a part of his life he would get to go back to, when he was free. They were some distant force that loved him, that *missed* him.

Tim will cry later. All of the skill that helped him compartmentalize everything else—he knows how to manage his own emotions. To make his parents’ deaths feel inconsequential.

For now, he tunes back in to the conversation.

“This meeting is premature,” Whelan is saying. “We know hardly anything about him. We need recon before we start planning.”

Black Mask says, “The Red Hood has demonstrated a specific vendetta against other organizations in Gotham. Our strategy is to manage our response *while* we do reconnaissance. All of you, and your men, and everyone associated with them will be in increased danger, until we deal with this threat.”

The Red Hood. Tim’s not sure he’s heard anything—wait, there were some speculative notes on a police report or two, mentioning the name as something arrested criminals had spoken of, but nothing more concrete than that.

From the sounds of it, nobody else has all that much more to go on.

Tim’s suddenly aware of the eyes on him. He and Black Mask are the only two still standing – side by side, now – and he turns his head just enough to realize they’re looking at him because Black Mask has his head tilted expectantly.

“If we want to know where to do reconnaissance,” Tim says, “we need his MO.” His gaze sweeps across the table. “What can we confirm he’s done?”

It’s partly a bid for time and mostly a bid for information. Tim really isn’t operating with much here—he gets documentation from the GCPD and updates from Black Mask, but if anything in the underworld doesn’t fall under either of those umbrellas, he’s blind.

When it’s clear he actually expects a response, a couple voices around the table pitch in. Tim builds the framework of the kind of guy he’s working with as quickly as he can.

The Red Hood is violent. There’s plenty of bloodshed on his hands already, though only a few actual bodies. He’s only been seen in Crime Alley; it’s competitive ground, if he wants to get big, but it’s the most unattended part of the city, even including vigilantes. However, whether or not he even has anyone working for him is debatable—the only guys that claim to answer to him are a street gang of less than two dozen, who recently had their leader dethroned, allegedly when he fled Gotham City.

Mostly, Red Hood seem to be targeting drug trade and pimps tied to big players. Some of his targets were Black Mask’s business—a large shipment of methamphetamines taken by a small team with impressive firepower. He’s an excellent marksman, from the rumors. Black Mask still has guys waiting for the meth to resurface in deals elsewhere.

If not for the guns and the gang ties, Red Hood would sound like a vigilante.

And the name. The Red Hood. It’s obviously not the Joker; firstly, Tim got the Joker’s bleak-as-always psychiatric evaluation from Arkham four days ago, and secondly, this isn’t anything approaching his style. There’s enough crazies in Gotham it could be a follower, or someone looking to use the fear attached to the Joker for their own goals. Too many variables for Tim to pin down a likely reason.

“Okay,” Tim says, when the room’s been quiet for slightly too long and they’re all looking at him expectantly. “The most significant piece of reconnaissance is going to be getting guys close to him. I’m going to assume none of you know of any ins with the men he’s supposedly already got, or their names.”

Silence greets that. “Great. Which means it’s best to see if we can sneak in. Anatoly, you’ve got at least two guys who have been thinking about trying to find new work. Suggest they try to work for the Red Hood; you’ll give them their usual cut while they’re looking for connections and for anything they turn up, and tell them they’ll be free to switch into his employ with no threat from you if they can find anything useful.”

His knowledge of Anatoly’s specific foot soldiers ratchets the tension in the room like Tim’s got a finger on the pin of a grenade.

Tim’s just made his position clear: he’s not being trained as Black Mask’s successor. He already *is*.

In truth, Anatoly is one of only two or three guys in the room Tim could do that for—anyone who was absorbed into Black Mask’s organization with Tim’s help, or poses a potential risk, Tim knows most of the members well.

“Akahara, you should have two people in the Black Clouds that fit a similar profile. Same offer. That’s the most we should shift of our own men; keep in touch with your regular informants and watch for anything unusual. Have your two go as a pair, to keep suspicion lower.”

With that, Tim turns to Black Mask. “You want a suggestion for course of action, too?”

“I’ll always take suggestions,” Black Mask says evenly, with only the faintest hint that he’s humoring Tim.

“Great.” Tim draws in a breath to prepare himself; his next suggestion has a risk of pushing his own plans too fast and showing his hand, but Red Hood has presented a good opportunity for the suggestion.

Tim says, “You’re going to want to take the Inzerillo mafia under control.”

If the tension before was Tim’s finger on the pin, this is him pulling it. Everyone around the table stiffens like they want to start running.

Messing with the mafia is maybe the one taboo of organized crime in Gotham. Standing your ground against them is one thing; easing into their market, stealing corners of their territory, sure, that’s just business.

Attacking any of the mafia families, especially to control them, is out of the question. They’re too big a network—not only would you have to deal with the wrath of the rest of Gotham’s families, which is almost certainly enough firepower to wipe any other major power in the city out, all families have ties to each other. Mess with half the families in Gotham, and you mess with the DeCavalcante family in Newark, and the Lucchese family in New York City—not to mention a half-dozen less well-known besides.

What Tim’s suggesting sounds like the equivalent of large-scale suicide, and it scares the hell out of everyone in the room.

Everyone except Black Mask, who just tilts his head in that way he does, and says, “Explain.”

“Enrico Inzerillo is the current boss,” Tim says. “He’s good at getting by, but he lacks his predecessor’s fine control. The family’s stable, and maintains its respect, but it’s barely grown since Enrico has come into power.” Tim holds up two fingers. “There are only two contenders for family boss, if Enrico’s taken out of the game. His son, Charles – who is currently working on constructing businesses that work below legal standards and double as fronts for the Inzerillos – and Enrico’s cousin, Vincent Del Arrazio, an ex-cop who was good for covering up family mistakes, and has since been managing relations to other families.”

He’s gone into enough detail that he has their attention again. He hopes so—half of this information had to be specifically requested, and he’s hoping that showing Black Mask his use of it will get him a wider scope in what he’s given.

“Del Arrazio’s focus is on growing the family any way he can. He’s accepted help from other families that Enrico initially turned down. Get him in charge *without* killing Enrico, and he’ll be willing to work for you.” Tim very distinctly does not look at Black Mask, does not let the tone of his voice change, as he keeps talking. “We give Arrazio enough leeway to cheat us. He’s not going to try and break free if he thinks he has the upper hand, so as long as he feels in control, we get the Inzerillo family.”

The room is quiet for nearly a full minute. Tim doesn’t look at Black Mask—the *reason* that Arrazio works is because he’ll think he can control Black Mask. Because he’ll think he can win.

Tim isn’t sure if Black Mask’s just giving Tim enough rope to hang himself.

Black Mask asks, voice unchanged, “Why are the Inzerillos so important? What about this is

related to Red Hood?”

Tim’s been thinking over his answer while he was laying out the plan. “Red Hood’s not mafia. He wouldn’t be going with this approach if he was. Which means he can’t control or attack the families, not unless he wants war. And if he’s only theoretically got two dozen men, he doesn’t want war.”

“So we take the Inzerillos, and we get both an in with a family, and men that Red Hood can’t touch.”

Tim nods, and finally turns to look at Black Mask. He’s half-expecting the mask to be turned out towards the rest of the table, but it’s focused down towards him.

“It’s a good suggestion,” Black Mask says. “Well done, Tim.”

Ordinarily, Tim makes himself look pleased with Black Mask’s praise. He takes no small amount of joy that for once, the setting fits him showing no sign of it at all.

Black Mask pulls out Tim’s chair. Tim sits, folding his arms across the table in front of him so that his black gloves are fully visible.

Sitting makes him feel short, now that he’s just below the eyelevel of everyone else at the table, and Black Mask is standing at full height to his left.

Black Mask’s guide to have him sit winds up being the signal that he’s finished his most major speaking portion of the night. Black Mask tosses him a question occasionally, but the bulk of his attention is focused on delegating and managing the more complex minutiae of the plan Tim has laid out.

Black Mask thinks on his feet pretty skillfully. The candidates he picks for easing towards the Inzerillos aren’t bad choices; Tim would’ve chosen most of them himself.

The delegation of typical deals and status updates of individual endeavors is brief, at the tail end of the meeting. Tim knows it’s because Black Mask prefers to discuss those in private—part of maintaining control is making sure no one person knows the entire picture.

Tim uses the opportunity to put faces and demeanors to the names and operations he knows. If he bemoans not knowing Black Mask’s lieutenants as often as he does, he should take whatever chances he’s given.

Someone here might be a weak point Tim can put pressure on.

The meeting wraps up quicker than he’d like, before everyone at the table has spoken. It means he’s got more limited information, but he’s used to that.

Black Mask hasn’t sat down the entire time, and it’s the press of his glove against Tim’s shoulder that indicates Tim should stand again.

They leave first. Black Mask turns his back, and Tim would detest the confidence that Tim knows to follow, if it weren’t well-placed.

He can’t help the way his head tips back when they get outside again. The night sky in Gotham never gets as dark as it did in Bristol—but Tim’s always preferred the dull orange-grey haze that makes the night stretch on for hours. He misses it.

Black Mask gets in the passenger seat of the car. Tim draws in a breath, lets it out, and gets in the back.

As soon as the door is closed, one guard is reaching for the blindfold as the driver pulls the car away from the curb.

“Tim.” Black Mask turns in his seat, mesh-eyes focused levelly on Tim, before the blindfold steals the sight from him. There’s—something, in Black Mask’s voice, as he says, “Are you going to ask me about your parents?”

Jack and Janet Drake are dead.

Behind the blindfold, Tim presses his eyes closed. He sort of wants to feel grief, or despair, but he’s pushed those emotions too far away already.

He just feels hollow.

He wants to know. How it happened. How long ago it was. How many news articles have been withheld. Maybe knowing would make the grief heavier. Maybe knowing would make it feel more real, more significant.

Tim says, “No.”

He can hear the shift of Black Mask’s suit as he turns around again in his car seat.

Tim tilts his head back against the leather of the headrest and thinks about the documentation needed to become an emancipated minor.

From there, Tim does a hell of a lot more than just telling Black Mask where Batman is going to be.

“The Dockyard Dogs have connections to a cop who’ll look the other way on an explosives deal, which they’re going to use for an assault against the storage warehouse on Rupert Street,” Tim says over the phone. “If we act on Thursday, we can take the explosives and blackmail the officer into selling that gang out. Their territory gives us a foothold against the Street Demonz.”

Tim says, and Black Mask does.

Tim passes Black Mask the printed files of an arrest record and upcoming trial.

“He needs to get a minimum of six months,” Tim says. “Outside of the county; it’s his fourth conviction and Avalon has a significantly lower reconviction rate from its community penitentiary programs than Gotham does. His second-in-command will collapse their ammo manufacturing operations in three to four weeks, and we can pick up the pieces.”

Tim says, and Black Mask does.

It’s a heady feeling. He tries not to let it get too far—tries not to let it consume him.

The thing is, Tim’s *good* at this. The thing is, for all intents and purposes, Tim’s building a

criminal empire. It won't last forever – that's the whole point, the hairline fractures Tim is building in, as Black Mask takes small piece by small piece, gangs of a dozen men and territory only a block at a time – but Tim *knows* how he could make it indestructible.

It's what Black Mask is banking on. Tim knows that, and that's why he can't give in to the power of it. Black Mask is the one who gives him access to power, proximity to it, and every second Tim enjoys it is another risk that Black Mask's grooming is succeeding.

Tim rattles off orders like items on a grocery list, and the paper trail of Gotham shifts and warps under his guidance.

That's not to say it all goes to plan. Tim is more or less a genius, granted, and he's spent almost five years of his life with nothing better to do than analyze and theorize about Gotham's criminal underworld—but this is Gotham. Planning can only be so effective when half of Batman's Rogues are insane enough to make decisions with no forethought whatsoever.

And then there's the Red Hood.

His agenda is hard to pin down, as is his skillset—beyond being a deadly combatant, there seems to be some *intelligence* in how he navigates Gotham's underbelly. He knows the right promises for the right people, knows who he can actually buy and who he needs to betray before they betray him first.

He's been in Gotham a lot longer than just his venture as Red Hood, that's for sure.

But his motive is the hardest part. The police these days write Crime Alley off as a lost cause more often than not, so Tim's records of what Red Hood is actually doing are patchy and sourced from Black Mask's informants more than his own analysis. As best he can tell, Red Hood flips frivolously between beginning to construct a system of organized crime underneath him, and then gutting half of it and starting again.

The loyal followers, he always keeps.

Tim knows that easily, even if the records are thin—the five men they snuck off Black Mask's payroll and onto Red Hood's roster are a good indicator. Tim has Black Mask keeping note of them, but subtly now.

Five weeks into their infiltration of Red Hood's men, four of the five candidates stopped responding to their contacts in Black Mask's organization. The other one returned to say that the Red Hood had given them all a deal: join with him completely, and he'll shield them from the backlash of quitting Black Mask's organization, or get lost.

Black Mask's men tend to have a difficult time getting away from him. That's not particularly unique to him – criminal activity is like that, especially in Gotham – but he's particularly controlling about it, keeping ties to even the men he lets leave, the threat of violent backlash sharp enough that usually, if they leave alive, they leave Gotham and never come back.

Black Mask hadn't said it, but Tim could read in his first reactions to the news about people joining Red Hood that his main fear was the potential of an information leak. They'd all been low-ranking, sure, but of the four lost, they'd all been working for him for at least several months.

Black Mask's fear is misplaced, Tim's sure; if Red Hood is after information, he gets it through blood and bruises, not promises of loyalty. Tim won't hurry to correct the paranoia, though.

The loyalty of Red Hood's men, as best Tim can tell, is genuinely earned. Despite the tearing-

down and building-up he's doing, Red Hood has a constant presence of about three dozen men that follow him. He treats them well; he doesn't risk their lives, doesn't abuse or threaten them, doesn't mistreat them. Black Mask's men are better paid under the Red Hood than they were before.

Tim thinks about an empty spot on his fourth corkboard. There are still some blanks in his plan—names he left for filling in later.

If he's going to defeat Black Mask, he needs a weapon.

Tim looks over the compiled evidence of Red Hood's specific, violent kind of justice, and fills in a blank.

Chapter End Notes

CH5 content warnings: none, actually!

really feeling Tim's desire to be outta here already (I have COVID and am incredibly ready to be out of isolation)

next chapter is going to be the finale of this series, which I'm SO excited to share! I'll see you next week for that!! <3

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

it's finale time!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Penguin is planning something,” Tim says. “This is the group he’s most likely to hire as mercenaries; give them control of the Little Tokyo gambling operation. They’ll take the profits as compensation for acting as security and leave Bueti in control.”

“I’m not here to talk business,” Black Mask says from his position sitting at his desk, his desk in his office in Tim’s apartment. He’d brought a bottle of champagne and a single glass in with him, and he pours it now, holding the glass and the bottle at an angle like he knows what he’s doing.

The bubbles hiss as he holds the glass out to Tim.

Everything we say is business, Tim thinks, but instead he says, “No?” and takes the champagne.

Tim had briefly entertained the idea that Black Mask only brought one glass because Tim was underage, but as amusing as that would be, he knows better. The mask doesn’t lend itself for drinking or eating, and Tim’s never seen Black Mask without it.

“You were declared dead today,” Black Mask says.

Tim knows. He saw the records enter Gotham’s system automatically this morning, with no immediate next-of-kin to postpone the announcement. Five years from the date he was declared missing.

Five years of being shuffled, apartment to apartment, like a cross between a dirty secret and a weapon of mass destruction. Five years of talking panic down like it’s trying to walk Tim to the edge of a skyscraper.

Five years of Friday night takeout-and-escape-attempts.

Tim says, “To my illegal survival,” and drinks.

It bubbles unpleasantly in his nose and stings in his throat—an all-around awful experience. It’s his first time in the last five years with something fizzy, and his first time with alcohol ever. It doesn’t even *taste* good. Tim’s neutral expression gives way to a faint nose scrunch of disgust.

Black Mask watches him. Tim isn’t sure if he’s expecting some show of emotion about the declaration of Tim’s death; if he is, he’ll be disappointed. Maybe the coldness is only a brave face, maybe it isn’t. Tim just knows that it’s the response that will give Black Mask the correct impression of him.

“You will have to do something about Penguin, though,” Tim tells him.

Two weeks later, Black Mask radiates a cold, dangerous kind of fury. He looks across the meeting table of his lieutenants and says, “Who wants to explain why Cobblepot is using blackmail material to look for the location of my successor?”

Tim shoves down the burst of satisfaction so that he can pull on a troubled frown. Black Mask’s back is to him, the sharp, light-devouring lines of his suit a wall between Tim and the rest of the table.

Black Mask lets his lieutenants scramble and stammer for a minute before he turns just enough that Tim catches sight of the whites of his eyes, behind the mesh eyeholes, and says, “What’s your plan for taking down the Penguin?”

Tim doesn’t bother to pretend to not have one.

“Murder looks like the most straightforward, but if anyone knows what he’s asking questions about, killing him is basically confirmation that he’s right. So we need an alternative strategy to put him down and keep him quiet. Penguin relies heavily on white-collar crime, financial manipulations, and drug manufacturing. Most of his strength, in a fire-fight, is mercenary. Undercut which groups he can hire and sever his social connections to Gotham’s elite, and he’ll be effectively stranded. You can blackmail him into submission or expose him and make sure the legal system listens to your money over his.”

The slight turn of Black Mask’s body out towards him indicates that Tim’s actually going to detail and delegate the specifics of this plan. Some of the players Tim wants aren’t here, but everyone in the room is high-ranking enough he can still name them, and Black Mask will handle disseminating the necessary information.

Tim needs the right people to buy-out and destabilize Penguin’s operations. Overthrowing someone like Cobblepot – especially when Black Mask, one of his biggest competitors, is going to be absorbing the remnants – is an earthquake that will tear through Gotham’s underworld.

Tim’s going to make use of the aftershocks.

“Lynx,” Tim starts, addressing the woman with the eyepatch, “you’re our primary contact for the Gotham City Hunters. We’ll use those to absorb any freelance contracts Penguin puts out once he realizes we’re closing in.”

He can do this. Oswald Cobblepot is one of the biggest pieces Tim needs to move on the board, to clear the path to Red Hood.

Black Mask’s frustration feels like a weight on Tim’s back. Frustration that it’s come to this—frustration that he *has* to topple Penguin, and Tim’s made sure the most efficient methods for it are absorbing many of those operations.

Having to hold Tricorner Yards stretches Black Mask even further. He resents it, but he knows Tim is right to make the call.

So Tim makes the call. The people around the table know to listen to him now, though they can dislike it however much they dare.

Black Mask waits until the others have left the meeting to turn his attention fully to Tim. The long table is more imposing when it’s empty, and it makes the distance between Tim and Black Mask that much smaller—a whole room, the wide wooden tabletop, and Tim stands two feet to Black Mask’s right.

“I’m not happy about this development,” Black Mask says. As if it even needs to be said.

“Neither am I,” Tim says. He tinges his tone with just a hint of frustration. “Cobblepot shouldn’t have *known* about me. Forcing him out of the way is going to complicate things.”

Cobblepot makes a living off of knowing about people. His system of informants is wide-spread, covering more of Gotham’s different groups and social castes than almost anyone else’s. A well-placed whisper, a suggestion, and he’d at least notice the difference in Black Mask’s operations, the new aggression and efficiency. If anyone in the underworld was going to put the pieces together, there was a decent chance it’d be him.

All Tim had to do was leave a hint or three that linked to the Heir Candidates case. One of the lieutenants marked as a suspect for the case happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when Penguin’s mercenaries took over the Little Tokyo gambling den. Whether or not Penguin thought to ask him the right questions, the man was given a reduced sentence by the police for providing more background information on the Heir Candidates case.

Of course, this guy wasn’t high-ranking enough to know about Tim. But that’s okay: the other suspects from the case, the other people who’d known about the decoy candidates, led a precise and ruthlessly efficient strike against a small gang on the fringe of Cobblepot’s territory. An attack distinctly at odds with Black Mask’s old operating standard.

Tim’s given up on betting on Batman. Black Mask is still watching, waiting, for Tim to try and cry for help. He’s *not* watching for Tim to flag down Gotham’s other mob bosses.

Black Mask had meant for the Heir Candidates case to subdue Tim. To reinforce the lack of an escape. Tim takes sharp satisfaction in using it to prove his own existence.

“What options do you suggest, for information control?” Black Mask asks.

Tim’s aware it’s a placating question. He knows, from the gaps in records Black Mask gave him a couple days ago, that certain actions are already being taken, out of his sight.

Tim still takes the time to plot out the most reasonable course of action. “There’s a reason the mafia are so hard to bring down,” he says, eventually. “A close-knit inner circle, loose connections, and extreme delegation make family bosses virtually invulnerable.”

Tim doesn’t know how many of the people that know about his existence are going to be alive in a month’s time. Most of the lieutenants are probably hard to replace. Any of the guards he’s no longer got—well, he isn’t optimistic about their chances.

Black Mask nods along thoughtfully. Tim knows he’s already working on it, knows the scale of today’s meeting was bigger than Black Mask intends to keep it. He’s going to cut back on how many lieutenants he keeps close, how many people actually get to talk directly to Black Mask. More delegation and less control, but greater privacy. Less risk of exposing Tim.

“Divide and conquer,” Black Mask says. Give some more of his responsibilities to his lieutenants, less accountability.

Tim nods. “You don’t have many other options.”

“I know,” Black Mask says, and Tim can hear the grimace in his voice, behind the bared black teeth.

It’s the greatest flaw of large-scale crime: that the boss must cede control to others.

Tim could work around it, if he really needed to.

“We’re lucky Penguin has so many hired hands,” he says instead. “The operations we’ll have to take on are just within our capacity to handle them.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” Black Mask says, the whites of his eyes too-visible behind the mesh eyeholes.

Tim shuts up.

Ultimately, the grand issue with Tim’s plan is that he’s a sixteen-year-old trapped in a windowless apartment, with two armed guards and a door that’s barred from the outside.

In his darker moments, Tim finds it funny. Smart enough to figure out how to build Rome in a year and raze it overnight, and defeated by a steel beam on his door.

The rest of the time, he’s forced to acknowledge the level of inevitable risk it adds to any of his plans. He can raze Black Mask’s operations to the ground, set fire to every building he controls, arrest or assault every single person he commands—but at the end of it all, when Gotham’s murky night sky is marred by lines of smoke, Tim will still be in this apartment.

At the end of it all, Tim is still an eleven-year-old tied to a chair, and Black Mask is holding the gun.

As far as obstacles go, it doesn’t, realistically, interfere with any of Tim’s plans. All of Black Mask’s power will be shattered or split or destroyed regardless of whether or not Tim makes it out of this apartment.

It makes it an easy detail to keep putting off.

Tim knows the best solutions. He can push any number of a dozen people to try for assassination attempts; he can get Black Mask stuck in a shoot-out; he can put Batman on the case and watch Black Mask pipeline towards Blackgate, regardless of all his wealth and power.

So he knows the best solutions. There are a hundred ways he could kill Black Mask, or get him out of the picture for good.

The only issue is, Tim wants to do it himself.

Black Mask is the thing of Tim’s nightmares. He’s the jailor, the warden, the wraith that haunts him. Black Mask is the single force that has hurt Tim, taken his life from him.

Tim wants to pull off the mask. He wants to look Roman Sionis in the eyes, make him a man, make him mortal.

Sionis could get killed in a fire Tim orchestrated, miles across Gotham. In all honesty, with the complexity of plans Tim is handling these days, it wouldn’t even be hard. It would be as easy as pressing a button, pulling a trigger.

There’s a thousand reasons why that he could give—some number of them might even be true. The *why* doesn’t really matter: what matters is that Tim is going to see Black Mask dead with his own

eyes. No prison time, no maybe-fatal bullet wounds. Nothing left to chance.

So there are easy solutions, where Black Mask dies miles and miles from Tim's apartment and it's the police or Batman who arrive, disable both of Tim's guards, and bring him out into the muddy air of Gotham's streets. But Tim isn't going to take any of them.

Making sure Sionis dies in front of him—it's petty. It's pointless. It's impractical. Tim's pretty sure several of Black Mask's fail-safe contingency plans count on it.

Tim's gonna do it anyway.

The target is a small, self-sufficient gang that operates just within the edge of Crime Alley, in a neighborhood centered around Ellsworth Road.

As small gangs go, Tim would honestly classify these two-dozen guys as closer to vigilante criminals than career mobsters. They organized from loosely associated no-name criminals to locally-respected enforcers about two years ago, when a food kitchen was being leaned on by one of Crime Alley's rotating minor crime bosses.

Since then, they've spent their time fending off robbers, extortionists, and more brutal gangs. The pimps in the area are held accountable for the safety of their prostitutes, and buy into the protection racket most of the shops are under to help take care of them.

They don't bite off more than they can chew; they've got nothing to do with drugs in the area, and they have virtually no ins with local law enforcement, so as soon as the cops get involved, they don't have much choice but to scatter.

Perhaps one of their most notable traits, these days, is that Red Hood has left them entirely alone.

He's dipped his fingertips into just about every other operation in Crime Alley, whether they've got sixty guys in their organization or six. Red Hood keeps an eye on Crime Alley, even if he doesn't control the entirety of it, and the threat of his interference is a fear tactic Tim would associate with Batman's style of vigilantism.

Black Mask's territory has been edging dangerously close to the edge of Crime Alley. He's been doing his best to avoid outright rivalry with Red Hood—which Tim certainly hasn't been making easy for him.

In the last few months, Tim's done his level best to corner Black Mask into an untenable situation, where he'll *have* to act. A new branch of the Inzerillos' illegal gambling was finally finished, with profits going under the table to Black Mask while he maintains security and brings in wealthy clientele, especially with the help of a half dozen of Penguin's old connections.

Unfortunately for Black Mask, Red Hood has just staked an unpredicted claim on the neighborhood six blocks down. It's one of only a few places that he's actually *claimed*, and Tim gets a sharp sense of satisfaction as he flicks through police records, looking at the reduced arrests and assaults of sex workers, lower juvenile delinquency, fewer overdose hospitalizations from the area.

Ellsworth Road is perfectly positioned, squashed between the gambling den and Red Hood's new territory.

Red Hood's proximity to the den endangers the mafia operation—for all he hasn't messed with any

families, Tim's not the only one who's confident he will, if he needs to. And because it's not one of Black Mask's operations, not for appearance's sake, they can't just pull out or relocate.

So Black Mask needs to double down.

"Provoking Red Hood still isn't the way to go," Tim says, leaning back against the edge of Black Mask's desk to focus his attention on the corkboard against the opposite wall. "He's shown to be heavily drawn to vengeance, and if he finds out about our involvement with the Inzerillos, we won't be able to bury it before other families find out. I'm not eager for the mafia to know we took out a boss."

"So the other options are cede control to the Inzerillos entirely, or take the Ellsworth neighborhood gang to hold on tighter to the area," Black Mask muses aloud. This is one of Tim's favorite parts of his work—watching Black Mask, with years more experience in criminal operations, reach the same conclusions Tim's already come to. "And our control of the Inzerillos relies on the pretense of letting them cheat us, so splitting off from them will make them a little too cocky."

If Black Mask was willing to cut his losses and run, he could make it out of this unscathed.

Tim waits for Black Mask's head to tilt towards him, before he turns enough to meet the black mesh gaze. Black Mask continues, "What steps can we take to mitigate backlash from Red Hood, if we take Ellsworth?"

Tim says, "I'd have to guess with that. Interfering minimally with the way they run things is our best bet, probably; maybe send a few of our guys to work alongside them without putting anyone directly in charge. An infiltration, not a takeover."

"Is that enough control of the area to hold him off the Inzerillos' den?"

Tim shrugs. "If it's not, we can increase it gradually. Gambling isn't one of his usual sore spots anyway."

Black Mask hums once—mostly convinced, and waiting for Tim to continue.

Tim says, "Drew is still in your employ, isn't he?"

He watches the way Black Mask stiffens slightly. Tim needs to be careful—this is close to showing his hand, showing that he's got a plan, and he's got to make sure it goes smoothly.

Andrew Kittigan was one of Tim's guards, up until a year or so ago. Tim is reasonably confident that Drew is the sole survivor of his guard—the only one who's left the position and avoided execution for what he knows. It's not usually a temporary job.

"Yes, he is," Black Mask says. There's that slight angle of his head that demands explanation.

Tim happens to know that Drew stopped working as his guard because his girlfriend was heavily pregnant. He wanted a role under Black Mask that had a lower mortality rate.

Tim *happens* to know that Drew and his girlfriend and their baby live in the Ellsworth territory.

"He's not done many jobs for you since the baby was born," Tim says, "and you can't argue that he'll be the least suspicious. Family in the area, history as a criminal. He *is* the perfect fit."

"One man isn't enough," Black Mask says. He's not thrilled about the plan, but Tim's right. Drew is the exact candidate they're looking for.

“Pull from the St. Bernard’s crew, for another two,” Tim says. “Whelan doesn’t like to let his guys go, but we put a few people in there years ago, so they’ve got the infiltration practice.”

On top of Drew, Tim’s hoping for two particular guys to get sent. Drew’s important – crucial, really – but it won’t work without the right supports. Tim’s spent the last several weeks sorting through records on Black Mask’s underlings, and their underlings’ underlings. Candidates for this mission were picked based on how probable they were to *seem* like they’d work, and how likely it is that they’re really volatile elements that don’t play well with others.

“I can work with that,” Black Mask says. Not *pleased*, but convinced.

Tim turns his head away, back to looking at the corkboard. No sign of victory. No sign that this is *anything* but a minor move to prevent warfare. He makes himself feel hardly anything, makes himself look flat and uninterested and casual.

This has all the potential of working. He’s got an additional plan or three or eight for down the line, if this fails, but if—if this lines up, Tim might actually *do it*.

Escaping has been a distant goal, months out of reach, for so many years. It almost makes it unnerving, to see the potential for a finish line.

“I was thinking of moving you again,” Black Mask says, cutting into Tim’s thoughts.

Tim doesn’t twitch, doesn’t look over. “You haven’t given me forewarning before,” he says, tone unbothered by the change of topic.

He isn’t sure if this means slowing down or speeding up his timeline. If he even can. Their conversation should mean he’s just set some of it into motion, and it will probably run without his intervention, now.

“I’m thinking somewhere with a view,” Black Mask says. “Closer to my headquarters.”

Fuck. Tim slams down the frustration and lets the flicker of genuine surprise be what shows on his face. “I haven’t had windows in years,” is the best he can think to say. “Are you—sure?”

He can hear the smile behind Black Mask’s bared teeth. “Yes,” Sionis says, deliberate. “I am.”

Okay. Somewhere with a view, near a central base of operations—Tim’s going to be surveilled to hell and back. Which means he has to make sure that *if* Black Mask picks the right guys, the timeframe fits everything in before he gets moved.

Not that he’ll actually know when that is. It could be tomorrow, it could be next month.

Well. At least Tim’s part is actually out of the way—he can’t back out now, even if he probably should. Nothing to do but pick at a few of Black Mask’s contingencies and bide his time.

Tim’s pretty sure a new cartel branching out from Peru is going to explode a series of abandoned tenant buildings in Black Mask’s territory. They don’t know that it’s an area where Black Mask stores weapons; Tim does.

He reaches for the flip phone on instinct, when he figures it out. He pauses with the plastic case flipped open in his palm, looking at the dully-glowing screen.

Tim eyes the date in the phone's upper corner. It's been three days since his conversation with Black Mask about controlling the Ellsworth neighborhood. Too soon? Too late?

He *is* still looking for distractions to occupy Black Mask's underlings.

Tim snaps the phone shut instead of calling. Another blank on the corkboard gets filled in.

"Hey, Tack," he says, careful to keep his voice low, while the other guard of the night shift is half-asleep in the bathroom.

Tack looks up from his smartphone, where he's been playing some mobile knock-off app of Peggle, and raises an eyebrow.

It's a gamble. Every third thing about this plan is a gamble.

Tack has known him for years. At this point, he's the one who's been in Tim's rotation longest.

"You were close with one of the guys who defected for Red Hood, right?" Tim asks.

His voice carries a false uncertainty. Tim knows *exactly* which of the four defectors Tack is friends with. He's the registered godfather of Lucille Han—making Tim extremely grateful for the hypervigilance and over-documentation of certain branches of Catholicism in Gotham.

Tack's friendship with Li Wei Han, Lucille's father, is one of the reasons Tim had the Black Clouds included as a group assigned to infiltrate Red Hood. Li Wei fits the profile of the genuine family man Red Hood tends to look after—and, crucially, he wasn't a necessary part of the Black Cloud's work at the time.

"Yeah," Tack says, carefully. Tim's never tried to use any of the guys as part of a move before, but he can appreciate the extra caution.

Honestly, by tone alone, Tim's pretty sure his work is already done. He needs to make Tack suspicious enough that it gets mentioned to Li Wei—someone who knows that Tack's spent several years on an incredibly specific assignment that he's never breathed a word about.

"Is everything fine with Red Hood?" Tim asks, falsely light. "They had a pretty rough week, from what I can tell, and I feel sort of bad for the guys I assigned that stuck with him."

They haven't had a rough week. Tim's betting that Red Hood has a personal enough relationship to each of his men that Li Wei will mention Tack's misinformation.

"Sure it is," Tack says, and settles back down to start playing Peggle again.

Tim allows himself a narrow slip of a smile. Tack's shoulders are just the barest hint on edge—he's going to think about that comment, definitely. Since Tim hasn't mentioned anything important to missions, or relevant to Black Mask at all, Tack won't feel pressured to avoid talking about it directly.

Tim isn't sure that Red Hood will make the jump to realizing Tim's existence. After all, even *Batman* hasn't realized Black Mask's mastermind is a prisoner, and Red Hood has no metric by which to separate Black Mask's previous style of operation from his current one.

But Tim knows Tack, and Tack knows Li Wei, and Li Wei knows Red Hood. All Tim has to do is

make each step of the message small enough that nobody is scared to pass it on, and big enough that Red Hood will still see the whole picture.

Tim has a few messages he's been threading throughout his work, small indicators of his existence—too small to be noticeable to Black Mask, too small to be worth bothering to pay attention to. Cobblepot's swift removal was one of those, a hint Black Mask couldn't avoid sending. Tim's being slow, being cautious; no one person has the power to tie together the coincidences, see the pattern. No one except Red Hood, and all he has to do is pay attention and put the pieces together.

Red Hood could actually be an idiot. His style of handling his work in Gotham shows he's not, but he's been keeping to himself and could still be getting by on luck.

If Red Hood is an idiot, Tim's as good as dead. But, if he's not—

Tim's hanging an awful lot on that *if*.

Black Mask takes control of the Ellsworth neighborhood.

Tim reads and re-reads the text, before he flips the phone closed.

He grins, wide and reckless. He lets himself savor it—the rare taste of power and victory together. It's sharp and sweet on his tongue, like the scrape of a jagged piece of candy. He swallows around the taste and feels relief wash through him.

One way or another, it's already over.

Tim knows the signs of what's coming long before Black Mask ever reaches his door.

It's a Friday evening. Normally by now, the night shift has asked what takeout Tim's getting, but no one has. There's more important things going on.

He only has one guard.

The other one left early in the evening. That alone was enough to send Tim to his room so he could pace out of sight, his mind spinning with possibilities. It's tonight. It has to be. Not a single other thing has ever been important enough to risk leaving Tim exposed—if Black Mask is willing to risk it, at least one of his contingencies for Tim has been disabled already.

Tim pauses in his pacing to stare at the top edge of his wall, and imagines Gotham's burning-orange sunset, the glare of twilight slanting across glass skyscrapers and the shadows beginning to thicken and congeal.

Tim imagines the trails of smoke like smudged thumbprints across the sky.

He's only got an hour or two left now. Black Mask will figure it out quickly, and it will take him only a little while longer to decide that someone's going to have to pay for everything that Tim just set on fire.

Tonight, the Penguin unveiled his ascent back into the echelons of Gotham's elite, and his money in the pockets of Gotham's mercenaries. Tonight, the Penguin got back the Iceberg Lounge.

Tonight, the boss of the Inzerillo Family was visited by Carmine Falcone. Black Mask's

puppeteering days are over, and all of the underground establishments he's been making money from are in the Inzerillos' name and the mafia's control.

Tonight, Lynx cut and run with the three other Chinatown groups Black Mask was holding. Tim knew she'd only need a hint of a suggestion from him; she's smarter than most of Black Mask's lieutenants put together.

Tonight, two cartels and one Scandinavian mob all separately attacked regions of Black Mask's territory and set drugs, guns, and money ablaze.

Tonight, Roman Sionis ran the length of the city trying to hold onto his strings of power, and he watched it all fall away from him anyway.

Tim picks his outfit slowly and deliberately. Pinstripe black slacks. An unmarred white shirt, meticulously pressed, with the top two buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Fine black leather gloves.

Tim moves out to the kitchen. The oven clock tells him it's gone eight o'clock.

It's out of his hands, Tim reminds himself. He resists the urge to pace. Instead, he drags his favorite armchair from the living room into Black Mask's office, set angled halfway between the desk and the door to the room. He's not convinced Black Mask will sit behind the desk or if he'll just be too angry for the posturing, but anything to buy Tim a little more time is probably a good idea to try.

Without additional intervention on Tim's part from here on out, his survival odds are about fourteen to one. The only reason it's an acceptable gamble is because this particular plan gives Black Mask less than a three percent chance of living until sunrise tomorrow, and that percentage only goes down if Tim's dead.

It takes most of his self-control to shove the numbers to the back of his mind. He's drawing in a steadying breath when he hears the distinctive, heavy *clunk* of the bar on the other side of the apartment door being pulled up.

Ears straining, Tim hears the guard by the door suck in a breath. The click of the safety on his gun.

Tim has contingencies if this isn't Black Mask; he can work with that, if he needs to.

The biometric lock beeps open.

He hears, "Boss?"

The neat, unmistakable click of Black Mask's dress shoes on Tim's floor.

Black Mask says harshly, "Go post up outside."

A pause, and, "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"But—"

Tim's face twists into a grimace as soon as the reply starts. That's as far as the guard gets, anyway—the next sound is the deafening crack of a gunshot, echoing off the walls of Tim's apartment.

Tim has just long enough to check the time with the flip phone, draw in a breath and brace himself

before Black Mask appears in the doorway.

He takes no small satisfaction in Sionis' appearance. There are scuffs at the edges of his dress shoes, a few drops of blood on the front of his shirt. His suit jacket is rumpled and doesn't frame him quite right, and his trousers are bunched in the join of his hip where he's been running. The light-devouring sharp lines are long gone, and the end result makes the grinning mask look desperate rather than indomitable.

The satisfaction surges through him, and Tim lets it wash right back out. He's got other things to focus on.

Tim's best guess says that he needs to buy himself five to ten minutes. His initial urge is to goad Black Mask, to at least speak first, but he's got no experience with Black Mask in a murderous rage, so he plays it safe and just watches, expression guarded.

Black Mask is holding a distinctive silver pistol. The light spilling from the office out into the hallway catches on it, draws Tim's eyes.

They're both quiet for a long moment, just looking at each other.

Tim's biggest fear is just that Black Mask is going to level the gun and shoot him, no time wasted on a back and forth. He isn't sure what Black Mask will do, when he's *really* angry—isn't sure even Black Mask knows. But he still won't speak first.

Black Mask says, "Do you feel like explaining, Tim?"

His voice is low and lethal. It reminds Tim of the silencer on the muzzle of a gun.

As much as monologuing would buy Tim time, both he and Black Mask know full well that's not his style. Black Mask still doesn't know that this an escape plan, not a sabotage attempt, or else he wouldn't be here.

"Do I need to?" Tim asks.

He doesn't bother trying to keep his body language relaxed, as Black Mask takes three slow steps into the room. His fingers, in their gloves, curl into the plush arms of his chair, and it feels strangely cathartic to let the nervousness show.

"How about I tell you the day I've had," Black Mask says, "and you can let me know when it's *not* your doing?"

Tim can't quite tell if it's a fully rhetorical question. He allows himself a short nod—combined with the look on his face, it probably comes across as terror.

In some ways, he would feel better if he was allowed to be confident, to show himself truly: to be smart, and deliberate, and cunning in ways Black Mask should have predicted and still didn't manage to. But his goal here is to keep Black Mask balanced between rage and apathy, to make him want something from Tim.

"This morning," Black Mask says, "I get this friendly phone call from one of the women who keeps an ear out for me. Someone's been asking questions, she says. Believe it or not, someone's been asking about Janus Cosmetics in relation to child abduction. Is this surprising yet, Tim?"

Tim's grip on the armchair relaxes slightly. Five to ten minutes. He can do this.

“I wasn’t prepared for Cobblepot to try the trafficking route, to be honest,” Tim says.

His eyes dart to the twitch of Black Mask’s fingers around the trigger guard of his pistol. It’s still held at his side, but Tim knows that Black Mask can raise it and fire before Tim could even stand up from the armchair.

Then Black Mask exhales, the sound sharp against the bared black teeth.

“You were expecting him to schmooze his way out of prison, buy back his mercenaries, and reclaim the Iceberg Lounge?” Black Mask repeats.

“The signs were all there, yes,” Tim says. He could elaborate—could buy a little more time with it, if he needed to. But there’s no questioning tilt to Black Mask’s head, and in some ways Tim *likes* that he has to demand the answers.

That Tim is the one with the power here, and Black Mask is the one asking for more information.

“Okay,” Black Mask says. “How about Lynx taking the Black Clouds, the Ghost Dragons, and the Gotham City Hunters?”

Tim nods again. “She was neglected and underutilized, honestly. And would recognize a sinking ship when she saw one.”

The words are out before Tim can modify the tone, the casual bravado of them rough against his own ears. The shift of Black Mask’s weight winds a spring in Tim tighter, and the steps Black Mask takes into the room have Tim pressing further back in the armchair.

Black Mask doesn’t lift the gun. He moves over to the desk and sits on the edge of it, facing Tim. There’s only a few feet between them now, and the metal of the gun scrapes loudly against the wooden desk when Black Mask leans his weight back on his hands.

“Funny how my greatest flaw seems to be failing to recognize potential,” Black Mask says.

It’s too close to bait, and as much as Tim would like to snark back a reply, anything he could say in response is only going to rile Black Mask up more. So he makes himself loosen his grip slightly, roll his shoulders back, and wait.

There’s several long, dragging moment of silence, and then Black Mask continues, “A few hours after sundown, I get word that some of our storehouses are under fire. Two of them *on* fire. And by now, I’m expecting foul play, I’m blaming *you*, so I send my most loyal to go deal with it, so we don’t lose money to the fires. Do you know what they found, Tim?”

Of course, Tim does. But the sharp edge of Black Mask’s voice is *daring* him to interrupt, and Tim’s not quite sure if it’s better or worse to rise to the temptation. Black Mask seems only angrier when Tim doesn’t, voice clipped and cold as he continues.

“Turns out, I’d sent my best to deal with no-name cartels that don’t even have a *foothold* in Gotham yet. Three of them! All independently deciding tonight was the night to try my patience. Can you guess how that worked out for them, Tim?”

Tim says quietly, “They won’t be trying to edge into Gotham again.”

Black Mask barks a harsh laugh. “No,” he says, flinty, “they won’t. They might’ve drawn all my forces to opposite ends of the city, but it’ll be the last thing they do.” He’s quiet for a second, and then: “I do have to ask. How did you manage to arrange that one?”

That one was mostly Lynx, Tim wants to say, because it's true—because she was smart enough to leak a little scrap of intel in the right place, the way Tim hadn't been able to do.

"That one was mostly luck," Tim says instead, because he has to make himself look like the one in control here. "I knew they were planning something, but I didn't have much control except for when I could make their targets least well-defended."

Black Mask says nothing. He drums two fingers against the barrel of the gun.

Tim thinks he's doing relatively well, keeping Black Mask wound up but not pushing him into an outright rage. He'd check the time, but there's no way to do that casually, and, well—Black Mask is much more likely to shoot Tim once he realizes the full extent of what Tim's intending.

"The cherry on top," Black Mask says eventually, "was when I got a call from Carmine Falcone himself. All the rest, Tim, we could've weathered through it. They were setbacks, but I was still *in control*."

No, you weren't, sits on Tim's tongue like a bullet. He swallows it back, lets it clink metallic against his teeth and lodge like terror in his throat.

"Carmine Falcone tells me he's been talking to Del Arrazio. Arrazio had some *very* interesting things to say about how the Inzerillo family has been making decisions for a while now, ever since his cousin entered a coma under mysterious circumstances."

Tim knows. Tim made sure there was just one thread left to tie Black Mask to the removal of the Inzerillos' old family boss, one Del Arrazio would inevitably find and fall back on when confronted about their suspicious cooperation with Black Mask's organization.

Dabbling in mafia business would have been a mark on Black Mask's reputation. Taking out a mafia head is enough of a mark that Black Mask may not be able to escape Gotham in time to go into hiding.

The scuffles with the cartels means that Black Mask has no defenses on him. Means that Black Mask is exposed, a powerful mafia's enemy and an easy shot for anyone who wants a step up in Gotham's criminal underworld.

"So," Black Mask continues, and there's something venomous leaking into his voice, "after the kind of day I've had, I practically feel like I should be *allowed* to shoot someone, you know? To let off steam. It's not every day your life's work collapses at your feet."

Mm. That's not good.

Tim thinks they're probably past the five-minute mark, but not the ten-minute one yet. He's not really sure how much time he's capable of buying, when it comes down to it.

Black Mask pushes up, standing from his lean against the desk. He looks at Tim, and Tim looks at where Black Mask's fingers stretch and flex around the gun.

Tim looks back up to the mesh eyeholes. He says, "You haven't mentioned the rest of it yet."

For one long, horrible, silent second, he thinks it's too far. He thinks Black Mask is just going to lift the pistol and shoot Tim without another word.

Black Mask says, "What else did you put into motion?"

Tim wishes he weren't sitting. Black Mask is only a foot away, maybe, and the mask looks more severe than ever at this angle, looming above him. But standing will move him closer, and he doesn't want to risk Black Mask getting physically violent, not yet, so he stays where he's sitting.

"You haven't mentioned Whelan, or the Ellsworth gang yet," Tim says.

He can tell both names catch Black Mask's attention.

"What's Whelan got to do with today?" Black Mask asks.

Tim tilts his head up a little further. "We've always agreed he's only ambitious when he's got rival group to compete with, and that his ambition will end in his subordinates splitting into their own factions." It's one of his biggest flaws, one they'd had to work around for years now. "Whelan's going to try to take control, and he's going to destroy any tie between all the gangs I pulled under your power."

Black Mask's voice is more stunned than angry when he says, "You planned for after tonight?"

Tim says, "Crime in Gotham won't just stop when we're dead, you know."

It's the first time he's ever used *we* to mean both he and Black Mask sincerely.

"Not just my life's work, but my legacy, anything I've left behind." Black Mask's stunned astonishment is melting back into rage. "You *brat!* After all the—"

His voice falters when the biometric lock on Tim's front door beeps the sound of an incorrect entry. Relief floods Tim, so heavy he forgets he needs to get moving for a second.

Okay. Show time.

Tim lunges for the hand with the gun. He doesn't need to disarm Black Mask entirely – has no practice with it – but he uses Black Mask's shock to grab the barrel of the gun and jerk it out of position in his hand, so that he'll have to readjust before he can fire.

Black Mask grabs for him with his empty hand, but Tim's Friday night escape attempts have given him plenty of practice at avoiding being grabbed, and he ducks under the outstretched white glove and barrels for the door out of the office.

He's hardly got a foot in the hallway before he leaps towards the kitchen—with the living room adjacent, it's the biggest area in the apartment, in case he needs the space for what's coming.

He tucks himself into a messy roll as he lands, twisting behind the kitchen island, as the door to his apartment explodes inward.

Smoke rushes in as the heavy metal door flies down the hallway where Tim just was, before it slams to the ground so hard Tim can feel the vibrations through the floor.

Tim scrambles to his feet, keeping low behind the counter in case he needs the cover.

In the still-smoking doorway of his apartment stands the Red Hood.

Red Hood has at least four different types of guns slung around his person. The only one he's carrying is a pistol that looks practically fragile, engulfed in his heavy, practical gloves. It's aimed down the hallway, not at Tim.

The helmet is impassive. Tim can't see any hint of a face beyond, just the sharp, unfriendly set of

two white eyes.

Black Mask steps out into the hallway, out in front of Red Hood's gun, and despite the loud blast that's probably fucked up Tim's hearing, he can still make out the sharp inhale of surprise that Black Mask fails to stop.

Now that they're both within Red Hood's line of sight, Tim's brave enough to straighten up and switch his gaze from Red Hood to Black Mask.

He says, "I should've explained the Ellsworth part before he got here."

Tonight, Red Hood realized Black Mask infiltrated one of the areas of Crime Alley trying to save itself, and took it for himself instead.

Tim's half-expecting to be shot at immediately for the comment, but apparently the need for his death plays second fiddle to Red Hood's presence. Black Mask doesn't even look in his direction.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Black Mask says.

Red Hood is wearing so many layers of Kevlar that Tim can't even tell how big the guy actually is; his physical presence is intimidating enough that it hardly matters, anyway.

"There's a kid in your apartment," Red Hood says. The voice is flat and monotonous, filtered to be unrecognizable through the helmet. None of Tim's best efforts have found any trails of who Red Hood might be, which is its own kind of indicator, at least.

Black Mask's attention slides to Tim for half a second, and moves back to Red Hood. "My successor," Black Mask says.

Tim has no idea if Red Hood is looking at his direction – if not for the comment, he'd wonder if Red Hood has noticed him at all – but he makes himself look smaller, anyway, more scared. Trying to visibly appear like a kid here against his will and out of his depth.

It was a gamble that Red Hood would clue in tonight. Tim's given him at least half a dozen hints: people from Black Mask's employ with information that they shouldn't have, the difference between Black Mask's stagnant leadership and the success of Tim's. A lead to a drug dealer that inexplicably links to the Heir Candidates case. Penguin's questions about Black Mask's involvement in a kidnapping.

Andrew Kittigan, a guy with all the right information, placed right into Red Hood's path. Drew would watch Black Mask's power burning and realize someone needed to save the teenage mastermind. Drew would realize his brand-new boss was exactly the right candidate.

Red Hood takes pity on kids. Of everything, that makes him the best weapon in Tim's arsenal.

"He's been here for years," Red Hood says. He doesn't lower his pistol while they're talking. Tim can't tell if it's anger or apathy or something else entirely.

"Yes," Black Mask says, a fraction more hesitant now, tilting his head slightly towards Tim. "He's on my side."

Oh, it *can't* be that easy. Tim fights the desire to give Black Mask the most withering look of his life. If Red Hood knew the full story, Tim would feel practically embarrassed—Black Mask managed to keep him prisoner for over five years, and he's somehow still dumb enough to make a statement like that.

All this time, and Black Mask hasn't learned not to hand Tim even an ounce of power.

Tim looks at Red Hood, and makes sure his voice is desperate when he says, "*Help me.*"

The words are hardly out of his throat before Tim hurls himself towards the kitchen tile, putting the counter between him and Black Mask. On the other side of the kitchen, two bullet holes punch their way into the plaster of the wall above the sink, where Tim's head would have been.

Tim's ears are ringing so loudly that he barely hears the scuffle that follows. There's a thud, yelling. The gunshots were Black Mask's, not Red Hood's.

No. No, he has to finish this. This ends *here*.

Tim staggers to his feet again, gripping the edge of the counter as he waits for the ringing to fade and takes stock of his surroundings.

Black Mask's gun is kicked aside, closer to Tim now than it is to where Red Hood is pinning him against the wall of the hallway. Sionis is struggling, but one of his legs is bleeding and his arms are twisted behind his back—Red Hood's hold is the only thing keeping him upright, and he can't get a good enough brace to shove himself up and fight back.

The silver pistol on the floor isn't the weapon Tim needs.

"You shot at a fucking kid!" Red Hood snarls, and the fury is sharp enough the helmet's effects can't hide it entirely. Black Mask's ragged breathing is harsh through the mask, but either Red Hood is in better shape or the helmet filters it out, because there's nothing but anger in his voice.

"At least he missed this time," says Tim. The words get the response he wants—Red Hood's grip tightens enough that Black Mask's shoulders pull back further to try and ease the twist of his arms.

"*This time*," Red Hood echoes, something darker mixed with the anger in his voice. He keeps Black Mask half-held against his chest, dragging his legs like dead weight as he stands to his full height and starts moving. He gets halfway to the living room and throws Black Mask the rest of the way.

Black Mask hits the floor with a groan of pain. Tim's got no idea what Red Hood did to his arms, but apparently it hurts; it takes visible effort for Black Mask to push himself up on the floor, into a half-sitting position with his injured leg laid across the ground in front of him.

There's a knife wound in his calf and a long, jagged one in his thigh. One shoulder of his suit jacket has been torn, and he's missing a glove.

Red Hood pulls his pistol from his thigh holster again. His grip is steady when he levels it at Black Mask.

Tim can see the whites of Black Mask's eyes, behind the mesh eyeholes, as he looks between the two of them, maybe hoping for some kind of salvation. For mercy, maybe.

The only face he can actually see is Tim's. Tim has no idea what he finds there—satisfaction, victory, fear or hope or freedom.

Whatever it is, it's enough for Black Mask to say, "Tim. You're going to lose *everything*."

The unsteady note in his voice, broken by his labored breathing, makes Tim's blood sing.

By the tone, it's not quite begging. Tim wasn't expecting begging—Black Mask would rather die with dignity than live humiliated.

Tim takes a few steps closer, moving carefully around the kitchen island to approach.

“No, I'm not,” Tim says. “I'm going to get my life back.”

“But you *enjoy* power,” Black Mask insists.

This is the fundamental truth he has planned around Tim with. That Tim would enjoy power over anything else. This is the person he tried to make Tim into.

Tim has no idea how much he succeeded.

“Sure,” says Tim, like it's a throw-away comment. “And maybe you could've controlled me with that for a while, but your first mistake was trying to make me hurt people.”

Tim steps even closer, looming over the figure of Black Mask on the floor. He watches Red Hood shift out of the corner of his eye, tense as Tim approaches Black Mask, but he doesn't do anything other than move slightly to the side so he still has a clear shot.

It's taking most of Black Mask's strength to sit upright, propped on his arms. Tim is, for maybe the first time in the last five years, completely unafraid of him.

He reaches down, pressing his fingers to the heavy, black clasps on either side of the mask. Sionis tries to jerk backwards, but Tim doesn't let him, just digs his fingers in around the clasps and pries them undone.

Tim pulls the mask off, and drops it on the ground between them.

Beneath it, Sionis' face is twisted with fury, with hate. Scarring dominates most of it; his hair is patchy and almost nonexistent, and the right side of his lips and mouth are damaged badly enough to reveal the too-white teeth beneath.

No more secrets. Just two monsters, teeth in each other's throats, a chokehold.

Inches from Black Mask's face, Tim says, “The last mistake you'll ever make, Sionis, is trying to hurt *me*.”

It's too quiet for Red Hood to catch, and Tim fills the sentence with everything he's never said: with disgust, derision, with acknowledgement of how much smarter than Sionis Tim is. It's as condescending as Tim can make it, as arrogant.

It feels good to let it out, even so briefly. It feels even better to see rage flood Black Mask's body like a riptide, like white-water rapids.

Black Mask lunges for Tim, a noise like a snarling animal tearing itself from him as he reaches for Tim's throat. Tim's fingers tighten as if around the trigger of a gun.

Red Hood shoots.

The sound is so loud, Tim somehow feels like it ought to make his vision go white. Instead, he watches in perfect clarity as Black Mask crumples, the momentum of his movement sending his body sprawling across the floor in Tim's direction.

The world rings and echoes. Nobody moves.

Blood spills from the hole in Sionis' forehead. Tim thinks, for just a second, that he sees the white of bone beneath, but it's nothing more than a flash before it's all red. Tim watches as the blood seeps across the living room floor. It reaches the pristine black surface of the mask, clogs in the mesh of the eyes and begins to congeal between the teeth.

Logically, Tim knows it's just the effects of a gunshot that close indoors, but the world around him is absolutely silent. Nothing moves, nothing breathes. Just blood spilling slowly across the floor.

He thinks he ought to feel victorious. He thinks he ought to feel satisfied, maybe. Relieved.

Tim won a long time before Red Hood put that bullet in Black Mask. This is just the last small step after Tim's already climbed a thousand.

Maybe he ought to cry. He's finally free, and he can feel the ache of *something*, in his chest, but it feels more like an absence where victory or relief ought to be. The sensation is hollow.

The corpse is just a formality.

Tim turns and looks to Red Hood. His hearing fades back in slowly, he thinks, but the apartment is pretty quiet, and mostly he begins to hear his own breathing again.

Then Red Hood says, "This ain't your first fucking body, is it, kid?"

If he were a little less careful about his intonation, it could almost sound like a threat. But Tim hears the difference—Red Hood is angry, but it's the same anger at Black Mask, at what's been done to Tim.

"No," Tim says. He steps over Black Mask's arm and moves towards the doorway of his apartment, past the guard's body on the floor of the hallway.

"Hang on," Red Hood says. He doesn't try to grab Tim, but he moves to stand in front of him, a hand raised placatingly. "Kid—how long has he had you?"

"Five years and four months," Tim says.

Red Hood's posture twists, and Tim would almost guess by the motion that he's letting loose a string of curse words, except that if he is, nothing filters out through the helmet.

Red Hood visibly pulls himself back together. He sticks his pistol back into the thigh holster and says, "Look. I don't—I mean, what the fuck do I do with you? You got a family to go back to?"

"No," Tim says, more on autopilot than anything.

He—*isn't* sure what he's supposed to do here. Red Hood isn't anything like Black Mask, anything like Tim expected. He's not sleek power, he's not perfect control, and he's not—before he shot Black Mask, he was intimidating, hyper-present.

Now, he tilts his shoulders like he's *unsure*, and Tim has not a single clue what Red Hood is going to do from here on out.

His expected chances of survival increased dramatically when Red Hood pulled the trigger. Tim cautiously lowers them back down a little.

Red Hood is standing between Tim and the open door.

"Fuck it," Red Hood says. The distortion removes the emotion in his voice, but his right hand curls

as if around the grip of a gun, and relaxes again. “We don’t have time for this shit.”

Red Hood steps forward, reaching for Tim, and Tim steps back. His brain stutters under the spike of fear, and it takes him a few seconds to realize why—he’s spent so long letting Black Mask grab him, touch him, and he’s expecting retaliation at the avoidance.

It doesn’t come. Red Hood’s reaching hand tilts up, placating again, and he says, “Look. I dunno what the fuck’s up with you, but *you’re* the one running Black Mask’s shit, which means I’m not gonna leave you around for the GCPD to find. Just—come with me, and we’ll sort your shit after Gotham stops being on fire.”

The vast majority of Tim’s experience with criminals indicates they shouldn’t give a shit about the wellbeing of a single sixteen-year-old. Even Red Hood’s soft spot for kids doesn’t cover this—he keeps crime away from them, but he doesn’t *protect* them. Doesn’t take them in.

Oh.

Tim’s not just any old sixteen-year-old. Tim’s a *genius*.

Tim is useful.

Red Hood reaches for Tim’s arm again. The texture of his glove is completely different from Black Mask’s, when it closes around Tim’s wrist—where Black Mask’s gloves were pristine, high-quality leather, Red Hood’s gloves are rough and practical, the texture made uneven through use.

Red Hood turns on his heel and stalks out of the apartment, and Tim’s dragged stumbling behind him. The grip on his arm is iron, unyielding, and though Tim isn’t truly trying, the fact that the grip is strong enough Red Hood can just *drag* him—

The physical force of it sends a wash of panic through Tim. A realization stutters through him, as Red Hood drags him into the elevator.

Tim doesn’t know what to do.

He hasn’t not known what he was doing for *years*. It’s—he hasn’t just been relying on plans, he’s bet his life on them. He’s planned *everything*.

But he didn’t plan for this.

Red Hood has a motorcycle in the underground car park, gleaming and untouched next to Black Mask’s car with slashed tires. Tim hasn’t gotten enough common sense back online to protest as he’s muscled onto the bike, squashed up next to the handlebars with heavy, Kevlar-covered arms boxing him in on either side.

He’s not going to panic. He’s *not*. He’s spent so many fucking years not panicking, for it to get the better of him now. Tim’s not panicking.

He just can’t seem to think about anything that isn’t Red Hood’s proximity, not touching but undeniably *there*, inescapable. The cold side of a rifle pressing against the back of his shoulder.

Red Hood doesn’t blindfold him. There. He can think about that.

Tim tries not to be too obvious about how hard he’s breathing. About how tense he is. It’s probably a lost cause—he must look like a rabbit before a fox, like a mouse in the shadow of an eagle.

Red Hood peels through the streets of Gotham so fast it almost doesn't matter that Tim isn't blindfolded.

He still gets flashes of the things they speed by. A pizzeria, closed for the night. A 7-Eleven. A gap between the buildings where Tim can see smoke rising in the distance. A middle school. A row of cop cars with lights flashing, on their way somewhere, just visible for a second before Red Hood swings a hard left into an alley.

The bike ride feels like an eternity. Red Hood takes another side street, down an alley, and turns the bike so sharply it slides sideways under a half-open metal shutter and screeches to a halt.

Tim knows exactly where he is, and where the exit is.

Okay. Okay, yeah—he can use that. He's—when the panic's done, and he's got a second to himself, he can use that. He can plan for it.

Something in Tim reminds him that if Red Hood knows Tim's seen the way to get out, he's probably not going to leave Tim capable of getting there. Something else in Tim shoves that away—it's practical, and he'll acknowledge it when he has to, but right now the more practical thing is dealing with the panic, and dealing with everything else after.

Red Hood's grip is on Tim's upper arm this time, roughly pulling him off the bike and steering him towards a narrow door at the back of what looks maybe like a garage of some sort, though it's hard to tell when the only light is what's spilling in from under the half-closed shutter.

Tim's wedged up a flight of narrow stairs, tripping over them in the dark, Red Hood's steady push the only thing keeping him moving. He staggers to stay standing when they reach the top of the stairs and Red Hood lets go of him.

Red Hood flicks on a light, and the bare bulb flickers to life overhead.

It's an apartment. It's only half-furnished—there's a couch and a mattress on the floor in what could maybe be a living area, with a few stacked books, and a three-legged table with a chair in the kitchen, and dirty dishes in the sink.

“Now, look, idiot,” Red Hood says. Tim makes himself pause the evaluation of the apartment – which has unbarred windows, so it can't possibly be where *he's* going to be put – to turn and face the emotionless red helmet.

As Red Hood starts talking, he's pulling the gloves off. His hands are mostly bare underneath—bandages wrapped over his knuckles, tinged pink in places. He tosses the gloves carelessly onto the table in the kitchen, his back to Tim.

“I don't exactly have somewhere to stash kids,” Red Hood says, then pauses, and goes, “Ah, fuck, I guess this is technically a kidnapping. There goes my spotless record.”

Tim barely hears him. Red Hood's hands are reaching for the helmet, fingers pressing into specific places along the underside of it. He says, “Anyway, I've gotta go kill, like, a *bunch* of people for the shit that's fallen apart tonight.”

He pulls the helmet off.

Jason Todd turns to face him and says, “So, kid, you're gonna sit tight 'til I get back.”

It's not even panic that Tim feels. It's not *anything*.

He was less surprised when he found out his parents were dead. Then again, people do die—and they don't, as a rule, *un-die*.

He literally doesn't know what to do with this information. How to process it, where to put it. He doesn't understand, and he just freezes, standing there staring at the face of a person who is definitely dead and definitely just kidnapped him.

It couldn't have been faked. Tim considers that for a second—but Bruce's grief, Batman's destruction, that was too real. That wasn't fake.

Jason's looking at him expectantly, an eyebrow raised. It feels like an expression Tim has seen on Bruce at some point, or maybe it's one he's imagined Batman ought to have.

He has no idea what he's expected to respond to.

“Okay,” Tim says, unable to form a single more coherent thought.

“Great,” Jason Todd, the Robin who died, says. He refills two empty spaces on his belt with grenades from a kitchen drawer, grabs his gloves in the non-helmet hand, and crosses the room back to the stairs.

As he passes Tim, Jason touches him on the shoulder, just the brief press of the back of his hand against the outside of Tim's arm. Tim can't figure out if it's meant to be friendly or threatening.

He puts the helmet back on as he goes down the stairs. Tim stares after him dumbly, just watching.

Jason Todd is Red Hood. Jason Todd is *alive*.

Tim has an organized list in his head of all the crimes Red Hood has committed since his appearance in Gotham. Since his *resurrection*.

Okay. Jason Todd's alive, and if the willingness to murder is any indication, it's maybe not exactly as a good guy. Except that Tim's standing in his apartment, free of Black Mask and away from the GCPD's questions—so maybe he is?

Okay. Tim takes a few steps further into the apartment, re-orientating himself.

Part of him thinks maybe he should just start running. But he's aware he's only just barely stopped panicking, and making a break for it with no thought in advance will probably lead to more panic—especially if it's unsuccessful, which Tim needs to prepare for.

He needs to make sure Red Hood at least can't follow him, if Tim *does* get away. But then again, what sort of security does Red Hood have in this apartment? Tim could very well find the exit booby-trapped with who knows what.

Tim swallows down the desire to escape. He makes it wait.

He's good at that.

Okay. Jason Todd is alive; Jason Todd is the Red Hood, a crime lord who has been slowly amassing a fiercely loyal following in Gotham and performing intimidating, calculated moves to disable and dismantle Gotham's organized crime.

Jason Todd has kidnapped Tim.

Tim has several options, especially now that he's alone, now that the noise of Red Hood's motorcycle has faded in the distance.

His most logical path forward is to determine if Jason is good or bad, and deal with him as such. Destroy his organization and avenues for power, or leave him in peace and allow him to help Tim organize his future.

But that's time-consuming. And more importantly—Tim *has* plans for his future. Plans he's already meticulously worked out. He doesn't need a well-meaning, magically-resurrected, anti-hero Jason Todd to throw a wrench into the works.

Or a ruthless crime lord Jason Todd to put a stop to it altogether. Neither option is particularly appealing.

Determining if Jason is fine to be left in peace, or worthy of destruction, would already be an ordeal that would take months. Tim already knew Black Mask needed to be stopped: he was one of Batman's Rogues.

Oh. Now there's an idea.

Batman figured out Black Mask needed to be stopped. Tim never made that decision.

Red Hood has never interacted with the Bat.

Bruce might have a hard time being unbiased. But this isn't the hardest thing Batman's been asked, Tim's sure—to decide if his own son, somehow alive again, needs to be either stopped, or supported.

Okay. Tim will do what he's done before. Borrow Batman's moral compass.

He moves further into the apartment with purpose. There's a laptop on the couch—a behemoth of a thing, clunky and clearly modified to support systems far beyond its original intention.

It's also still open, logged in. It feels like such a blinding oversight it has to be a trap, but it's—this is *Robin*, even if it's Red Hood, and Tim can't help himself as he sinks onto the couch and pulls the laptop onto his knees.

It's almost laughably, embarrassingly easy to do this part. Tim pulls up Google Maps. There's a closed vape shop below the apartment that they drove by when they came in.

He pulls the geographic coordinates, writes them into a Word document. Gets up, goes to the window, adds *top floor*.

Tim titles the file *JASON TODD* and sends it to Batman.

Which sounds straightforward in a way it really isn't—he has to reach a highly-secure server, which at least Jason's already most of the way into, and then Tim has to send the file somewhere it will pop up with a notification. It's at least a lot easier when he doesn't have to bother trying to hide his interference in any way.

But he gets it done, which is a testament to his potential as a hacker, even years out of practice.

Great. With his knowledge of the events that are going on tonight, where Batman was planning to patrol before they began, and how long it's already been, Tim reckons he has about eleven minutes before Batman shows up. Nightwing could be anywhere from twenty seconds earlier to four

minutes behind.

He can't let himself overthink this. He has at least ten minutes and forty seconds, and maybe Tim's quick at making plans, but he can't risk checking out and getting lost in his own head. Red Hood and Batman will stall each other long enough for Tim to slip under the radar, and hopefully, by the time Bruce has either captured or reconciled with Jason, they'll both have forgotten who told them in the first place.

Tim pokes through the pile of clothes on the floor near the mattress. He finds a pullover sweatshirt that smells fine, and has no visible stains. It'll do. He pulls it on over his nice dress shirt, and heads for the stairs.

Tim makes his way down slowly, in the dark, waiting for something to go wrong. A trap to go off, an alarm to sound, a door to slam.

Nothing. He reaches the cold, half-lit garage without an issue.

He can't overthink it. It's *right there*.

Tim almost doesn't know what he's supposed to do now.

His body has its plan, and it keeps moving on instinct. He crosses the garage, the smell of burnt tires lingering from Red Hood's sliding stop, and ducks under the metal shutter, still not fully closed.

The alley smells terrible. No alarms go off. Nothing explodes.

Tim starts walking.

He looked up the route on Google Maps. It repeats in his head, a set of directions. A plan.

Before he's really aware of it, Tim is running.

Beyond the alley, Gotham is the same as she's always been. The dirty orange street lights. The miserable wet shine of the pavements, puddled and damp from recent rain and heavy fog. The starless sky that never truly gets dark.

Tim feels like he should thank her. Gotham. For waiting. For letting him dig his fingers into her clay and smudge burning smoke trails across her sky.

Then again, Tim killed Black Mask for her tonight. That's probably thanks enough.

Even tonight, while the city burns and the mob splinters and the infighting is only *beginning*, Crime Alley has enough desperate people to target a well-dressed sixteen-year-old, and Tim has plans he has to start putting in motion.

He's grinning as he turns and keeps running.

Gotham's harsh air drags through his body like it's made of nails, scraping his throat raw—he's unused to breathing this hard, running this far, unused to any long-term exertion at all. His head is filled with the sound of his own heartbeat and his mouth tastes like blood with how hard he's breathing.

Tim can't stop smiling. Doesn't want to. He did it. He *did it*.

He's free.

Chapter End Notes

CH6 content warnings: panic, named character death (in a good way)

Red Hood is trying so hard to be cool & normal about Tim and he just didn't think it through... which he may end up regretting.

this is our finale!! we only have the epilogue left, which is a LOT more chill (it's easy to be chill if you're really good at compartmentalizing now...) I had so much fun with the finale, I love writing the pay-offs for big stories and the difference between Tim and Black Mask now compared to the first chapter

more Tim & Jason dynamic is swiftly on the way, too, in the upcoming works of the series. my poor beta reader can hardly read as fast as I'm writing this AU. Sarah, you're my lifeline.

if you've enjoyed this so far, leave kudos, bookmarks, and comments! i'll see you all next week for the epilogue!

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tim might be free, but he's not done with all his plans, not yet.

The night he escapes, the night Tim kills Black Mask, he sprints recklessly through Gotham to the Central precinct. James Gordon is on the roof, next to the shining Bat-Signal.

Tim knows he doesn't have to worry about Batman, not tonight. Batman is dealing with Red Hood. But he needs someone who will buy a convincing lie, and tell it to Batman like it's a truth—the Commissioner is smart, but he's not Batman, and Tim knows he can sell a good lie.

He also needs somewhere to take cover for the night. There's a good chance that one of Black Mask's contingencies was a retrieval team, so Tim needs to make sure if there is one, they don't find him until after they've learned Black Mask is dead. It'll be news by tomorrow, but tonight, it's just Sionis' body in an apartment somewhere in the East End.

James Gordon lets Tim spend the rest of the night in his office, and in the morning, he provides him the phone number and office address of the Drakes' lawyer, the social agency that will help him determine his legal guardian, and a locksmith that can get him into his own house.

That morning, Tim visits the town hall before anything else. He's given two stacks of paperwork: one for cancelling his certification of death, and one for his legal emancipation. He fills them out on an uncomfortable bench next to the front desk, keeping half an eye on the overwhelmed and exhausted city employees dealing with the aftermath of last night.

He visits his lawyer. He leaves the paperwork there, skips calling the social agency entirely, and catches a bus out to Bristol to meet the locksmith outside the Manor's front gates.

The route from the bus stop to Drake Manor is still familiar, though it's been so many years since he's walked it. When the sidewalk ends, and Tim has to continue in the narrow strip between the grass and the road along the edge of the neighbors' grounds, he pauses.

A lifetime ago, an eleven-year-old got stuck under a hedge, and got caught.

The hedges are gone. Tim stands, just for a few seconds, and looks at the flat, unmarred grass where they once were. They've filled so many of his nightmares that the bright daylight almost makes this feel like a separate world entirely.

And then he keeps walking.

Drake Manor is eerie, dust-covered floors and white-sheeted furniture. As he walks through, Tim notes which of the artifacts in their display cases Jack and Janet would want to be donated to which museums. What furniture is heirloom, what he can replace and redecorate to his own tastes.

There's a business card for a therapist, an old family friend, in his father's desk drawer. Tim rubs his thumb along the edge of it as he paces the length of the sitting room, slowly wearing the sharp-cut card into a soft curl, unable to make up his mind. It had been assumed to be part of the plan, however long ago. Tim never really *decided* that he'd changed his mind, but.

He leaves it on the coffee table in the main sitting room, along with all the other contact

information Gordon gave him.

The house never used to feel too big. Tim becomes harshly aware of it as the sun begins to go down—the light slants down the hallways, giving the house an unfamiliar glow. The dark begins to creep in.

There are probably a hundred different entrances into this house, if Tim counts the windows. No one *knows* to come after him, not really—Black Mask is dead, and the remnants of his power are already dissolving into infights and smaller factions. Anyone who knows Tim is worth going after is going to have more important things on their hands.

Tim hasn't had windows in years, and it makes him feel like a raw nerve, makes him feel watched. The black, heavy sky of Bristol hangs far beyond, nothing like the close curl of Gotham's orange-grey haze, and offers no comfort.

Any number of Black Mask's allies could be creeping across the grounds. Could already be in the house. Could already be *here* for Tim, to take him back, to lock him away again.

Tim's got a roster of the people who are likely to be a threat to him. Some are imminent – Whelan, Zsasz, Black Mask's most ambitious and most devastated – and some are distant. If Lynx decides to come for Tim, she's going to do everything in her power to make sure he never sees her coming.

There's no lights in the grounds of Drake Manor. No neighbors. No *warning*.

Tim turns six rooms' worth of lights on and falls asleep on the couch.

In the morning, Tim picks up the therapist's business card, and puts it in the trash. Maybe it would help. But Tim's got things to do, paperwork to get sorted, a will to get enacted, and a business to inherit.

He'd told himself it would help. He'd told himself he would get a therapist, he would grieve, he would be *guilty*. He would finally be able to feel all of the things he's not been able to feel. But it's—but he doesn't *need* to. Because it wasn't his fault, it wasn't his choice.

There's no point in risking everything he has to do in order to talk to a therapist. Confidentiality agreements don't cover the kind of things Tim's done, and even if he bribed someone—one more woman like Dr. Harleen Quinzel, and it's over for Tim forever.

He goes into town to talk to his lawyer, and see a real estate agent about apartments in Gotham.

Two days after his legal resurrection processes, Tim gets a call from the social worker apparently assigned to his case.

She leaves a voicemail. Tim listens to the opening spiel, up until she mentions that he's got a distant aunt and uncle on his dad's side, then he deletes the voicemail.

The court date for his legal emancipation is set thirty-six hours later. She doesn't call a second time.

Drake Industries is, of course, the hardest part of the will to sort through.

Obviously, his parents left him the means to hold control of majority shares in the company. It's in the hands of proxies right now, trusted associates of his parents and the other elite of Gotham, but it will eventually default its ownership back to Tim.

There's a voice in Tim's head that isn't his. Black Mask, low, insistent, as Tim thinks about taking over his parents' company.

You enjoy power.

Tim shoves it aside. It was the last attempt to control him Roman Sionis ever made.

The Drakes' lawyer also shows Tim a few drafted notes that never got officialized, before their deaths—notes on how Tim should be given a position within the company that, at minimum, keeps him financially stable. None of those ever got officiated, so Tim's on his own.

The additional catch, the lawyer points out, is in the Drakes' wording of their will. In most cases, they use *of legal age*—which Tim will be, after the emancipation goes through. But the majority shares in Drake Industries say, specifically, *his eighteenth birthday*.

In most cases, it'd be useless semantics. Not in this one. Tim's going to have to put in a little extra work.

The lawyer watches him as he reads it, and Tim gives him this small, pitiful smile, and says, "I guess they were still worried about making life a little *too* easy for me."

But, still. Eighteenth birthday or not, the parts of Drake Industries they've left him in the will is more than Tim was expecting. Janet Drake was a good mother, but she was never a soft or sentimental woman when it came to business.

Their will is written testament to a refusal to accept that their son was gone forever. They believed, enough to stake the company on it, that Tim would return.

An echo of old love aches in Tim's chest, as his lawyer explains that part of the will. His parents are gone, and his memories of his childhood are faded—they're from someone else's life, now, a person Tim can't really remember being.

But the will. It's proof. A love letter in his mother's language.

It matters more than Tim thought it would.

Tim's new apartment is practically the definition of modern luxury. It's a large penthouse, with wide-open floor plans and windows that look out over a skyline of Gotham's white-collar offices and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. The kitchen is sleek white, black, and stainless steel, and the muted grays and blues of the living space that occupy much of the rest of the apartment's main room are a gorgeous complement. He has two spare bedrooms, two offices—and, notably, one room he's repurposing into a saferoom of sorts.

He'd been half-debating going for a bunker, rather than a penthouse. It would be more practical in terms of defense, especially since Tim's not sure if Red Hood is going to eventually come after him—or send the Bat. But solid concrete walls and eight military-grade alarm systems would hold Batman off about as well as an open window, in the end, so Tim didn't bother.

The apartment is vastly better than Drake Manor. The house was too big, like trying to sleep in the center of an empty warehouse. The apartment is spacious, but ultimately it's less than a dozen rooms, and Tim can check every room easily before he goes to bed.

With a moving team paid an exorbitant amount for a last-minute rush move-in, it doesn't take Tim more than two days to settle in. There's not much he's bringing with him from the Manor—his old possessions belong to a different Tim. He brings some family things: a formal portrait and a few genuine vacation photos, a couple of his parents' most treasured archeology display pieces and heirlooms, and several fireproof boxes of the Drakes' legal documentation and assets.

He also brings a small box of a half-dozen SD cards. He's long since lost the photos on the camera, the ones that damned him in the end, but he isn't going to fall into the habit of repeating mistakes.

In between directing the moving team and making enough idle chatter that none of the movers are going to start badmouthing him to the press scrambling for any hint of his public presence, Tim compiles a to-do list on his new smartphone.

It practically feels infinite, adding six items before he even gets the chance to take one off, but then again, Tim's no stranger to setting goals so out of reach it's hard to even picture where to start.

There's no official title to the to-do list. Tim's not dumb enough for that. But in his head, it gets to be the *Fuck You, I'm Going to Have a Normal Life* to-do list.

Because Tim can rationalize a lot of things away. Tim can justify or cast aside the guilt of helping Black Mask—not like he had a choice, after all.

At the back of his mind, Roman Sionis' voice hisses, around bared, bone-white teeth: *You're going to lose everything.*

Tim's going to finish the to-do list. Take every step he needs to take to have—not a normal sixteen-year-old's life, exactly, but an everyday, unremarkable life. No more crime. *That* will shut up the ghost in his head. He hasn't lost anything worth wanting.

A significant portion of his to-do list are things that are going to require digging up all of the contacts that the Drakes left behind in their passing. Jack and Janet's last secretary had been the greatest help—she's recommended Tim the company to turn to for hiring a driver, a personal shopper, a cook, a finance assistant, the names of whoever used to work for his parents. A thousand and one things an adult of his social class, financial means, and intended career ought to have.

Tim visits his father's old tailor, and waves a card connected to one of his parents' bank accounts to get however many dress shirts and slacks and suits he's told are a good start, then gets sent to the recommended store for buying high-end dress shoes. Then it's cuff-links and ties, then it's a laptop. On and on.

It's exhausting, to play pretend on two fronts—mimic what he remembers of his parents' mannerisms, always a little too young and distracted to really pay attention to things like how they talked to expensive stores' employees, and then to layer on top of that the flustered emotiveness of a normal sixteen-year-old boy.

Tim spends seven hours and thousands of dollars hopping from store to store, rapidly re-collecting all the possessions necessary for the impression he *really* needs to give the public, if he's going to be a sixteen-year-old taken at all seriously.

Then he takes a taxi to Old Navy, and spends a hundred dollars on soft, baggy T-shirts and sweatpants and hoodies and warm socks. Because, well—it's all he knows, aside from dress shirts and slacks and black leather gloves.

In the check-out line at Old Navy, Tim calls one of the numbers he's been given, and hires a chauffeur for tomorrow morning over the phone.

The apartment that night feels a little less cold, with a couple sweatshirts scattered here and there, and a fifteen dollar king-sized blanket on the couch. It feels a little more like *Tim's*.

Tim used to believe that about his old apartments, too. He doesn't quite win against the crawling unease at the back of his neck.

Three days later, Tim bounces from interview to interview. He's got three scheduled today and one tomorrow morning—for The Gotham Times, Gotham Gazette, Gotham Globe, and Gotham Daily. His own little thank-you to the four news agencies whose papers kept him connected to Gotham.

The interviews are taped, but will only be released as articles. Tim dresses his part anyway; a rush-order pair of slacks and a pressed white dress shirt with a dark tie. A pair of black leather gloves.

The bulk of each interview is focused on what happened to Tim. Well, on the cover story—the lie he gave to the Commissioner that inevitably got leaked to the rest of the world. Tim's been practicing for these interviews, rehearsing the lies out loud, making sure there are no gaps between each news agency that some vicious journalist could latch onto.

Officially, Timothy Drake was kidnapped and trafficked out of Gotham at age eleven. He was lucky enough to remain in the United States, being bumped up and down the East Coast for a few months. Eventually, the people that were holding him got broken up by another gang, and Tim got pushed into child labor.

Tim's sure that Gotham's gossip magazines will speculate about the truth of the story, questioning if it's been sanitized for the public, but he's avoiding anything in the official lie that might allude to child sex trafficking. That's a level of trauma he doesn't have it in him to fake, and beyond that, it would imprint him onto the public conscious as irreversibly traumatized. Child labor isn't *pretty*, but it's less likely to overshadow Tim's public presence later in his life. Plus, Tim found enough police records for the situation to be plausible with movement of criminal organizations in other cities, and unless anyone asks every possible witness across a string of cities on the East Coast, there's no way to prove he's lying.

Besides. Maybe it wasn't true for the first year or so, but technically Black Mask *did* force him into underage unpaid labor. That part just happens to be less important than several of the other major crimes he inflicted on Tim.

By last interview of the day, Tim's got all the answers down. He'd made note this morning of what details he'd give to which agency—a couple little anecdotes for each one, a mention of a different terrible thing that'd happened to him. An accident with a machine, a severed finger.

They're nearly twenty minutes into the interview when Tim recognizes the smile that the interviewer, a man called Alexander Knox, is giving him. It's the quickly-becoming-familiar smile that means they're moving on from the questions about Tim's absolute fabrication of the last five years of his life, to the questions about his recovery.

Alexander – *call me Allie*, which Tim definitely won't, while he's on-record – says, "I've heard you're planning to live on your own, Tim. Is that just because of your parents' passing? I'm sure you've heard it a thousand times already, but you have my condolences."

Tim accepts the statement the way he's expected to—a slight dip of his head, his eyes focused on the ground. Enough sentimentality to be an admission of his loss, a display of grief, but not enough emotion to make the people around him uncomfortable.

"That's been the biggest adjustment," he agrees softly, which is—the *fact* that it's a lie sticks with him, even though he was planning on saying it. Tim makes his voice a little lighter, more humorous, when he says, "I couldn't tell you how much of the last week has been going through their paperwork, either. They were busy people."

Satisfaction rises up sharply at the look on Alexander's face, curious and triumphant in equal measure. Tim hasn't exactly realized how good he's gotten at leading conversations—a significant amount of time talking to Black Mask was always setting him up to ask the questions Tim wanted to answer.

"I assume you mean paperwork related to Drake Industries, your parents' medical technology development company, correct?" Alexander asks.

Tim brushed up on his hacking skills last night. Nothing too invasive—just a peek into some of the personal accounts and reading preferences of Drake Industries' board members. What news agencies the majority of them read in the morning.

The greatest commonality – the place most of them might *accidentally* find an article about Tim – was the Gotham Globe. So Tim needs to give an elevator pitch on his intentions with the company that's interesting enough it will be published by tomorrow.

"Mom and Dad always used to talk about me taking over," Tim says, and smiles. "Of course, when I was little, I assumed it was because they wanted more time for traveling to dig sites. But now that I'm looking over what they left behind, I realize how much the company actually mattered to them."

"It's a connection between you and them," Alexander offers.

Tim nods along. "Drake Industries is what they wanted their legacy to be, not the museum artifacts. That was a hobby, but their livelihood was trying to help people."

From what he remembers, Tim would bet his entire inheritance it was the other way around. But there's no need to speak ill of the dead, especially when their friends are the ones in charge of the company Tim fully intends to inherit.

"Officially, there's not much I can do with the company for a few years," Tim adds, assuaging the fears he's anticipating, that a teenaged majority shareholder is about to start throwing his weight around. "But I've been talking with the CEO, a friend of my parents, Phillip Marin. I'm going to start working with him, to learn as much as I can for the future."

Marin's actually been really uncooperative on that front. He doesn't want a sixteen-year-old poking through all of Drake Industries' files, because it's going to make it very hard to hide all of the embezzling and bribery he's been doing since he first stepped into the position.

The CEO might not want a teenage assistant shadowing him, but the board of directors is *definitely* going to be keen to get Tim some knowledge about the business world before he inherits majority

shares of the company. Enough pressure and enough scrutiny, and Marin will give in to make sure nobody looks too hard.

Once Tim's officially the CEO's assistant, or intern, or whatever title they'll make up for him, he'll have the authority to get a legal team involved in pursuing the paper trail Marin has invariably left behind.

So he ducks his head shyly when Alexander Knox says, "You're an ambitious young man, Timothy."

Tim gives him a small smile and says, "I'm taking after my parents, then."

He doesn't mean it to be a lie. But the words come out with the same mild, polite tone of his lies, and Tim deliberately doesn't think about who *else* he might be taking after.

It all goes according to plan, of course. Tim's good enough at what he does for that.

Marin finally responds to his request to come over for dinner the night after the article gets published. Tim knows he's made up his mind, by the time he shows up, but he plays his part anyway—impressionable sixteen-year-old, smart enough to be worth teaching but dumb enough he'll never be a threat.

Tim's got a week until his position as intern officially starts. He goes grocery shopping for the first time in his life, hacks into Marin's personal and work laptops and builds himself a back door, and starts doing the research on how to secure his apartment's network.

He buys himself a camera. A proper, expensive one, like the ones that used to be birthday presents from his parents when he was little.

At night, when Tim lies restlessly awake because he's never tried to have anything near a normal sleep schedule before, he stares at the camera on his dresser. He thinks about the SD cards he still hasn't looked at, in a lockbox under the hidden trapdoor that his lamp is standing on.

Somewhere out in the city, Batman and Nightwing still flit over rooftops the same way they did when Tim was a kid. They stop to talk to Commissioner Gordon, silhouettes against the glare of the Bat-Signal.

Tim's not the kid that used to chase them. He won't track them. He *won't*.

It doesn't matter. He knows their pattern by heart, now, anyway. The newspaper this morning said there was a Wayne Foundation event tonight, which means out in Gotham City, Nightwing is covering Batman's patrol route. The clock on the bedside table says one forty-three, meaning unless he's ahead of schedule, Nightwing's skirting the southernmost edge of Robinson Park right now.

There's been no news about Red Hood *or* Jason Todd, not that Tim's seen. The idea nags at him, like a loose thread—he'd meant for Batman to draw Jason back in, obviously, reunite with his missing son. Tim's plan had been hasty and poorly thought out, and must've fallen through.

No. Tim has *nothing* more to do with vigilantes. Nothing more to do with Gotham's criminal underworld.

You enjoy power, Roman Sionis snarls, the whites of his eyes flashing in the darkness of Tim's

bedroom.

Tim closes his eyes and doesn't sleep.

Tim's seven weeks into his internship when the police step out of the elevator into the lobby outside Marin's office.

Marin's secretary – a competent and highly qualified woman in her forties, Lila Seward – stands up from her desk. From all of the evidence Tim's found, she's not paid off herself, but she is complicit in Marin's embezzlement.

"Can I help you, officers?" she asks mildly. A five-foot-two obstacle between four police officers and the CEO's door.

"We have an arrest warrant for Phillip Marin," says the officer in front. Charlie Fields—newer to the force, passively corrupt rather than actively. Tim glances over the other faces and determines that Marin will at least make it to the station with them, but from there he's going to be relying on Black Mask's leftover blackmail material to make sure he processes through the system correctly.

Huh. There's shock on Lila's face at the arrest announcement. Maybe *not* complicit after all.

Tim hops to his feet to put a hand on her shoulder and steer her out of the way. "Sorry, sir," he says to Fields, who barely spares him half a glance. "He should be in his office."

The door closes behind them.

They don't hear most of the exchange. But Marin storms out, face a mask of fury, the officers right behind him.

The rage only grows when he catches sight of Tim. "*You*," he snarls, low and furious, and Tim—

Well, Tim's faced down significantly worse things than middle-aged businessman Phillip Marin, and he doesn't even bother to step back.

"You *framed* me," Marin accuses, his eyes wild, still approaching. "You're after my fucking job! You—you—"

Tim's voice is chilling, borrowed from someone else's throat, when he says, "Are you done acting like a child, Mr. Marin?"

Charlie Fields is a good enough officer to catch the fist Marin throws at Tim. Tim doesn't even flinch, doesn't bother to step back, just stares at the ugly hatred of Marin's reddening face.

They'll add attempted assault to his charges. Tim will make sure of it.

Marin's still swearing and red in the face as they move him bodily to the elevator.

Tim's just ruined his life. He isn't going to feel guilty over that. Marin should've known better than going after Drake Industries.

People don't get to hurt you, Tim, Roman Sionis reminds him.

Black Mask had wanted to be the only one that hurt Tim. Wanted to be the only one Tim was scared of.

He was right in some ways, that people don't get to hurt Tim. Not because Tim's *special*, or whatever the hell Black Mask had wanted him to believe.

People don't get to hurt Tim because Tim knows how to make them stop.

Timothy Jackson Drake is announced the Interim CEO of Drake Industries the Monday after Marin is arrested.

There's too much chaos going on right now for the board to properly put together a committee to hire a new chief executive. Tim's been in training for almost two months, and Lila Seward vouches for his intelligence and his capabilities, which at least gets him an hour in the board room to convince them.

The board themselves are under internal review, of course, which is why they rush it so much. In order to get charged with bribery, Marin had to be bribing *someone*.

Tim knows how to perform to an audience. He wins the vote – narrowly, but he's not surprised by that – and smiles through the victory of it, sweet and sharp on his tongue.

Two months before his seventeenth birthday, Tim Drake steps into Drake Industries' CEO office, which once belonged to both Jack and Janet Drake, and now belongs to him.

It's a far cry from how he remembers it; it's cold minimalism, no paintings or artifacts or the framed family portrait drawn by a four-year-old Tim on the corner of his mother's desk.

The office is void of any sign of Marin. Tim allows himself to feel a little smug about that—Marin was the type of man always playing a part, and he performs admirably even when the role is to disappear.

The smooth metal and plastic surfaces, at least, are in no way reminiscent of the heavy, imposing wooden furniture Black Mask preferred. The greatest commonality to Sionis' office are the floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall.

The view is different, but the meaning is the same. The windows are a display of power, a claim to the bigger picture, to treating Gotham like she's a chess board.

Tim spent years shaping Gotham from a windowless apartment. The irony isn't lost on him.

He sets his laptop on the surface of the gleaming desk. When he opens it, the news article he found this morning, buried several pages beneath the front-page news of Drake Industries' new CEO, is still open on the screen, bold black title heavy as a promise.

Janus Cosmetics Makeup Doesn't Conceal Crime, it reads.

One last piece of Black Mask's legacy, up in smoke.

It had been fun to watch. It was something Tim had already set in motion, long before his escape—Oswald Cobblepot had managed to scrape together enough evidence to implicate Janus Cosmetics in the Heir Candidates case, the kidnapped teenagers. The evidence was mostly falsified, of course, but it was enough to put together an investigation that exposed the extent of the company's corruption.

Tim's *Fuck You, I'm Going to Have a Normal Life* to-do list is done. He's had two months to go through it—he's got the personal staff he needs, the job he was after, and a legal team pursuing Marin. He's—done.

Tim doesn't know what to do now.

He'll stay as CEO, of course, either until he's replaced or until he wants to join the board.

You enjoy power, Roman Sionis reminds him.

Standing in the CEO's office – *Tim's* office – within a massive and respected medical development company, he feels less sure about that statement now. Is this power? It's—it's *boring*.

Tim knows what *would* be fun. He's itching for it, looking out over Gotham's skyline, so much more interesting and imperfect than the sleek minimalism of the office's interior. He could leave his fingerprints in her clay. Could leak a few rumors, shift a little money, and watch the world change. He could justify it, too, if he picks the right targets. Pretend that what he's doing is about doing what's *right*.

Maybe, if Batman ever comes knocking, Tim could even say it's about atonement.

Tim isn't sure if stopping crime will necessarily make him a better person than he is now, with his motives being what they are. But he's also not sure that matters to him as much as it should.

It's not like he's going to make a costume and run rooftops himself, anyway. There's easier ways to stop crime: a plot he can disrupt, an ear that will turn to the right whisper and repeat all the wrong information. Nothing hands-on.

It could be a hobby. For when being a corporate businessman seems boring. Batman manages both, after all, and he's more physically involved than Tim will ever need to be. It'll certainly be more challenging than being a CEO, that's for sure. More fun.

You enjoy power, the ghost of Roman Sionis insists.

Batman walks a tightrope: he has to be powerful enough to save Gotham, and weak enough that she can still make her own choices.

Sure, Tim had said. And maybe it's true. Maybe Tim *does* enjoy power.

Power, after all, will give him the ability to change things. To make Gotham better. To be something other than Drake Industries' CEO, up in his high glass office. To feel alive.

Tim surveys his sleek, silent office for several slow seconds. It's not like it'll take him *long* to get into the police database.

The hard part, of course, will be not getting caught by Batman.

Tim suspects he can figure that part out.

oh my god we're done!!!

oh I've had so much fun writing this! thank you so much to everyone who's left comments, either all along or now that we're at the end--seeing this AU spark joy for other people has been so deeply rewarding. I cannot stress enough that there's still SO much more of Tim's story to tell. I keep thinking about him meeting and interacting with different Bat vigilantes and I have so much more writing I need to do. he's not even a vigilante yet!! *Batman hasn't even shown up!*

I hope to god you've had as much fun with this AU as I have, and definitely tag the series if you want to see more of my upcoming stuff! also come hang/harass [my tumblr](#) if you want to scream at or with me. god I can't WAIT to write more of this

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!